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She was Imperatrix, ruler of ten million space-warriors
... But here on night-bound Kalgan, where the Great
Destroyer coiled, only one lonely vassal stood true ...

The REBEL of VALKYR

A novel of the Dark Ages of Space
by ALFRED COPPEL



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PLANET STORIES

No. 5

British Edition

Flaming Novel of the Starways

THE REBEL OF VALKYR

Alfred Coppel 4

... From the Dark Ages of Space emerged the Second Empire
... ruled by a child, a usurper, and a fool! The Great Throne
of Imperial Earth commanded a thousand vassal worlds—bleak,
starved worlds that sullenly whispered of galactic revolt ...
At last, like eagles at a distant eyrie, the Star-kings gathered ...
not to whisper, but to strike!

A Powerful Novelet

STAR SHIP

Poul Anderson 29

The strangest space-castaways of all! The Terran Explorers left
their great inter-stellar ship unmanned in a tight orbit around
Khazak—descended, all of them, in a lifeboat to investigate that
alien, weirdly medieval world—and the lifeboat cracked up!

Two Thrilling Short Stories

DEATH-WISH

Ray Bradbury 48

They wandered the dead and fragile cities, looking for the
legendary Blue Bottle—not knowing what it was, nor caring, not
really wanting to find it ... ever ...

MEEM

Margaret St. Clair 58

The fog-shrouded marshlands of Vaudria seethed with manhunt
... and Duncan, with his stolen secret, sought refuge in the
Earth-Ship GORGO. Safe behind steel ... until ...

The Rebel of VALKYR

By ALFRED COPPEL

OUT OF THE DARK AGES OF the Interregnum emerged the Second Empire. Once again in the space of a millennium, the banner of Imperial Earth waved above the decimated lands of the inhabited worlds. Four generations of conquerors, heirs to the greatness of the Thousand Emperors, had created the Galactic Empire, by force of arms. But technology, the Great Destroyer, was feared and forbidden. Only witches, warlocks and sorcerers remembered the old knowledge, and the mobs, tortured by the racial memories of the awful destruction of the Civil Wars, stoned these seekers and burned them in the squares of towns built amid the rubble of the old wars. The ancient, mighty space-ships—indestructible, eternal—carried men and horses; fire and sword across the Galaxy at the bidding of the warlords. The Second Empire—four generations out of isolated savagery—feudal, grim; a culture held together by bonds forced of blood and iron and the loyalty of the warrior star-kings...

—Quintus Bland,

ESSAYS ON GALACTIC HISTORY.

KIERON, warlord of Valkyr, paced the polished floor angrily. The flickering lights of the vast mirrored chamber glinted from the jewels in his ceremonial harness and shimmered down the length of his silver cape. For a moment, the star-king paused before the tall double doors of beaten bronze, his strong hands toying with the hilt of his sword. The

towering Janizaries of the Palace Guard stood immobile on either side of the arching doorway, their great axes resting on the flagstones. It was as though the dark thoughts that coursed through Kieron's mind were—to them—unlinkable. The huge warriors from the heavy planets of the Pleiades were stolid, loyal, unimaginative. And even a star-king did not dream of assaulting the closed portals of the Emperor's chambers.

Kieron's fingers opened and closed spasmodically over the gem-crusted pommel of his weapon; his dark eyes glittered with unspent fury. Muttering an oath, he turned away from the silent door and resumed his pacing. His companion, a brawny man in the plain battle harness of Valkyr, watched him quietly from under bushy yellow brows. He stood with his great arms folded over the plaits of grizzled yellow hair that hung to his waist, his deeply-lined face framed by the loosened lacings of a winged helmet. A huge sword hugged his naked thigh; a massive blade with worn and sweat-stained hilt.

The lord of Valkyr paused in his angry pacing to glare at his aide. "By the Great Destroyer, Nevitta! How long are we to stand this?"

"Patience, Kieron, patience." The old warrior spoke with the assurance of lifelong familiarity. "They try us sorely, but we have waited three weeks. A little longer can do no harm."



The great silver fish leaping up into the bowl of night, the ships of the Valkyr fleet rose from Kalgan . . .

"Three weeks!" Kieron scowled at Nevitta. "Will they *drive* us into rebellion? Is that their intention? I swear I would not have taken this from Gilmer himself!"

"The great Emperor would never have dealt with us so. The fighting men of Valkyr were ever closest to his heart, Kieron. This is a way of doing that smacks a woman's hand." He spat on the polished floor. "May the Seven Hells claim her!"

Kieron grunted shortly and turned again toward the silent door. Ivane! Ivane the Fair... Ivane the schemer. What devil's brew was she mixing now? Intrigue had always been her weapon—and now that Gilmer was gone and she stood by the Great Throne...

Kieron cursed her roundly under his breath. Nevitta spoke the truth. There was Ivane's hand in this, as surely as the stars made Galaxies!

Three weeks wasted. Long weeks. Twenty-one full days since their ships had touched the Imperial City. Days of fighting through the swarms of dilettantes and favor-seekers that thronged the Imperial Palace. There had been times when Kieron had wanted to cut a path through the fawning dandies with his sword!

Gilmer of Kaidor lay dead a full year and still the new Court was a madhouse of simpering sycophants. Petitions were being granted by the score as the favorites collected their long-delayed largess from the boy-Emperor Toran. And Kieron knew well enough that whatever favors were granted came through the ambitious hands of the Consort Ivane. She might not be allowed to wear the crown of an Empress without the blood of the Thousand Emperors in her veins, but by now no one at Court denied that she was the fountainhead of Imperial favor. Yet that wasn't really enough for her, Kieron knew. Ivane dreamed of better things. And because of all this hidden by-play, the old favorites of the warrior Gilmer were snubbed and refused audience. A new inner circle was building, and Kieron of Valkyr was not—it was plain to see—to be included. He was prevented even from presenting his just complaints to the Emperor Toran.

OTHER matters, he was told again and again, occupied His Imperial Majesty's attention. Other matters! Kieron could

feel the anger hot and throbbing in his veins. What other matters could there be of more importance to a sovereign than the loyalty of his finest fighting men? Or if Toran was a fool as the courtiers privately claimed, then surely Ivane had more intelligence than to keep a Warlord of the Outer Marches cooling his heels in antechambers for three weeks! The Lady Ivane, herself so proud, should know how near to rebellion were the warrior peoples of the Periphery.

Under such deliberate provocations it was difficult to loyally ignore the invitation of Freka of Kalgan to meet with the other star-kings in grievance council. Rebellion was not alluring to one like Kieron who had spent his boyhood fighting beside Gilmer, but there was a limit to human endurance, and he was fast reaching it.

"Nevitta," Kieron spoke abruptly. "Were you able to find out anything concerning the Lady Alys?"

The grizzled warrior shook his head. "Nothing but the common talk. It is said that she has secluded herself, still mourning for Gilmer. You know, Kieron, how the little princess loved her father."

The lord of Valkyr frowned thoughtfully. Yes, it was true enough that Alys had loved Gilmer. He could remember her at the great Emperor's side after the battle of Kaidor. Even the conquered interregal lords of that world had claimed that Gilmer would have surrendered the planet if they had been able to capture his daughter. The bond between father and daughter had been a close one. Possibly Alys had secluded herself to carry on with her mourning—but Kieron doubted it. That would not have been Gilmer's way, nor his daughter's.

"Things would be different here," said Nevitta with feeling, "if the little princess ruled instead of Toran."

Very different, thought Kieron. The foolish Toran bid fair to lose what four generations of loyal fighters had built up out of the rubble of the dark ages. Alys, the warrior princess, would add to the glory of the Imperium, not detract from it. But perhaps he was prejudiced in her favor, reflected Kieron. It was hard not to be.

He recalled her laughing eyes and her courage. A slim child, direct in manner and bearing. Embarrassing him before his

earing Valkyrs with her forthright protestations of love. The armies had worshipped her. A lovely child—with pride of race written into her patrician face. But compassionate, too. Gravely comforting the dying and the wounded with a touch or a word.

Eight years had passed since bloody Kaidor. The child of twelve would be a woman now. And, thought Kieron anxiously, a threat to the ascendant power of the Consort Ivane . . .

THE tall bronze doors swung open suddenly, and Kieron turned. But it was not the Emperor who stood there framed in the archway, nor even the Consort. It was the gem-bedecked figure of Landor, the First Lord of Space.

Kieron snorted derisively. First Lord! The shades of the mighty fighters who had carried that title through a thousand of Imperial Earth's battles must have been sickened by young Toran's . . . or Ivane's . . . choice of the mincing courtier who now stood before him.

The more cynical courtiers said that Landor had won his honors in Ivane's bed, and Kieron could well believe it. Out in the vast emptinesses of the Edge men lived by different standards. Out there a woman was a woman—a thing to be loved or beaten, cherished or enjoyed and cast off—but not a touchstone to wealth and power. Kieron had loathed Landor on sight, and there was reason enough to believe that the First Lord reciprocated most completely. It was not wise for anyone, even a Warlord, to openly scorn the Consort's favorites—but restraint was not one of the lord of Valkyr's virtues, though even Nevitta warned him to take care. Assassination was a fine art in the Imperial City, and one amply subsidized by the First Lord of Space.

"Well, Landor?" Kieron demanded, disdaining to use Landor's title.

Landor's smoothly handsome features showed no expression. The pale eyes veiled like a serpent's.

"I regret," the First Lord of Space said easily, "that His Imperial Majesty has retired for the night, Valkyr. Under the circumstances . . ." He spread his slender hands in a gesture of helplessness.

The lie was obvious. Through the open doorway of the royal chambers came the murmuring sound of laughter and the

reedy melody of a minstrel's pipes in the age-old ballad of *Lady Greensleeves*. Kieron could hear Toran's uncertain voice singing:

*Greensleeves was all my joy,
Greensleeves was all my joy,
And who but Lady Greensleeves?"*

Kieron could imagine the boy—lolling foolishly before the glittering Ivane, trying to win with verses what any man could have for a pledge of loyalty to the Consort.

The Valkyr glared at Landor. "I'm not to be received, is that it? By the Seven Hells, why don't you say what you mean?"

Landor's smile was scornful. "You outworlders! You should learn how to behave, really. Perhaps later . . ."

"Later be damned!" snapped Kieron. "My people are starving *now*! Your grubbing tax-gatherers are wringing us dry! How long do you think they'll stand for it? How long do you imagine *I* will stand for it?"

"Threats, Valkyr?" asked the First Lord, his eyes suddenly venomous.

"Threats against your Emperor? Men have been whipped to death for much less."

"Not men of Valkyr," retorted Kieron.

"The men of Valkyr no longer hold the favored position they once did, Kieron. I counsel you to remember that."

"True enough," Kieron replied scornfully. "Under Gilmer, fighting men were the power of the Empire. Now Toran rules with the hands of women . . . and dancing masters."

THE First Lord's face darkened at the insult. He laid a hand on the hilt of his ornate sword, but the Valkyr's eyes remained insolent. The huge Nevitta stirred, measuring the Pleiadeane Janizaries at the door, ready for trouble.

But Landor had no stomach for sword-play—particularly with as young and supple a fighter as the Warlord of Valkyr. His own ready tongue was a better weapon than steel. With an effort, he forced himself to smile. It was a cold smile, pregnant with subtle danger.

"Harsh words, Valkyr. And unwise. I shall not forget them. I doubt that you will be able to see His Majesty, since I do not believe the tribulations of a planet of savages would concern him. You waste your time here. If you have other business, you had better be about it."

It was Kieron's turn to feel the hot goad of anger. "Are those Toran's words or Ivane's dancing master?"

"The Consort Ivane, of course, agrees. If your people cannot pay their taxes, let them sell a few of their brats into service," Landor said smoothly.

The die was cast, then, thought Kieron furiously. All hope for an adjustment from Toran was gone and only one course lay open to him now.

"Nevitta! See that our men and horses are loaded to-night and the ships made ready for space!"

Nevitta saluted and turned to go. He paused, looked insolently at the First Lord, and deliberately spat on the floor. Then he was gone, his spurs ringing metallically as he disappeared through the high curving archway.

"Savage," muttered Landor.

"Savage enough to be loyal and worthy of any trust," said Kieron; "but you would know nothing of that."

Landor ignored the thrust. "Where do you go now, Valkyr?"

"Off-world."

"Of course," Landor smiled thinly, his eyebrows arching over pale, shrewd eyes. "Off-world."

Kieron felt a stab of suspicion. How much did Landor know? Had his spies pierced Freka the Unknown's counter-espionage cordon and brought word of the star-kings gathering on Kalgan?

"It cannot concern you where I go now, Landor," said Kieron grimly. "You've won here. But . . ." Kieron stepped a pace nearer the resplendent favorite. "Warn your tax-gatherers to go armed when they land on Valkyr. Well armed, Landor."

Kieron turned on his heel and strode out of the antechamber, his booted heels staccato on the flagstones, silver cape flaunting like a proud banner.

II

PAST the tall arch of the Emperor's antechamber lay the Hall of the Thousand Emperors. Kieron strode through it, the flickering flames of the wall-sconces casting long shadows out behind him—shadows that danced and whirled on the tapestried walls and touched the composed faces of the great men of Earth.

These were brooding men; men who

stared down at him out of their thousand pasts. Men who had stood with a planet for a throne and watched their Empire passing in ordered glory from horizon to horizon across the night sky of Earth—men worshipped as gods on out-world planets, who watched and guided the tide of Empire until it crashed thundering on the shores of ten thousand worlds beyond Vega and Altair. Men who sat cloaked in sable robes with diamond stars encrusted and saw their civilization built out from the Great Throne, tier on shining tier until at last it reached the Edge and strained across the awful gulf for the terrible seetee suns of mighty Andromeda itself . . .

The last few of the men like gods had watched the First Empire crumble. They had seen the wave of annihilation sweeping in from the Outer Marches of the Periphery; had seen their gem-bright civilization shattered with destructive forces so hideous that the spectre of the Great Destroyer hung like a mantle of death over the Galaxy, a thing to be shunned and feared forever. And thus had come the Interregnum.

Kieron had no eyes for these brooding giants; his world was not the world they had known. It was in the next chamber that the out-world warrior paused. It was a vast and empty place. Here there were but five figures and space for a thousand more. This was the Empire that Kieron knew. This Empire he had fought for and helped secure; a savage, darkling thing spawned in the dark ages of the Interregnum, a Galaxy-spanning fief of star-kings and serfs—of warlocks and space-ships—of light and shadow. This Empire had been born in the agony of a Galaxy and tempered in the bitter internecine wars of reconquest.

Before the image of Gilmer of Kaidor, Kieron stopped. He stood in silence, looking into the face of his dead liege. The hour was late and the Hall deserted. Kieron knelt, suddenly filled with sadness. He was on his way to rebellion against the Empire that he had helped this stern-faced man to expand and hold—rebellion against the power of Imperial Earth, personified by the weak-faced boy standing draped in the sable mantle of sovereignty in the next niche. Kieron looked from father to son. By its composure and its nearness to the magnetic features of the great Gilmer, the face of young Toran seemed to draw

character and strength. It was an illusion, Kieron knew.

The young Valkyr felt driven hard. His people hungered. Military service was no longer enough for the Imperial Government as it had been for decades. Money was demanded, and there was no money on Valkyr. So the people hungered—and Kieron was their lord. He could not stand by and see the agony on the faces of his warrior maids as their children weakened, nor could he see his proud warriors selling themselves into slavery for a handful of coins. The Emperor would not listen. Kieron had recourse only to the one thing he knew . . . the sword.

He bowed his head and asked the shade of Gilmer for forgiveness.

A SLIGHT movement caught his battle-sharpened eye as someone stirred behind a fluted column. Kieron's sword whispered as it slid from the scabbard, the gemmed hilt casting shards of light into the dimness of the colonnade.

Treading softly, Kieron eased his tall frame into the shadows, weapon alert. The thought of assassination flashed across his mind and he smiled grimly. Could it be that Landor had his hirelings after him already?

Kieron saw the shadowy shape slip from the colonnade out on to the great curving terrace that bordered the entire west wing of the Palace. Eyes narrowed under his black brows, the lord of Valkyr followed.

The stars gleamed in the moonless night, and far below, Kieron could see the flickering torchlights of the Imperial City fanning out to the horizon like the spokes of some fantastic, glittering wheel. The dark figure ahead had vanished.

Kieron sheathed his sword and drew his poniard. It was far too dark for sword-play, and he did not wish to risk letting the assassin escape. Melting into the shadows of the colonnade again, he made his way parallel to the terrace, alert for any sign of movement. Presently, the figure appeared again beside the balustrade, and the Valkyr moved swiftly and quietly up behind. With a cat-like movement, he slipped his free arm about the slight shape, pulling it tight against himself. The poniard flashed in his upraised hand, the slender blade reflecting the starlight.

The weapon did not descend . . .

Against his forearm, Kieron felt a yielding softness, and the hair that brushed his cheek was warm and perfumed.

He stood transfixed. The girl twisted in his grasp and broke free with a gasping cry. Instantly, a blade gleamed in her hand and she had launched herself at the Valkyr furiously. Her voice was tight with rage.

"Murdering butcher! *You dare!*"

Kieron caught her upraised arm and wrenched the dagger from her grasp. She clawed at him, kicking, biting, but never once calling aloud for aid. At last Kieron was able to pin her to a column with his weight, and he held her there, arms pinned to her sides.

"You hellcat!" he muttered against her hair, "Who are you?"

"You know well enough, you murdering lackey! Why don't you kill me and go collect your pay, damn you!" grieved the girl furiously. "Must you manhandle me too?"

Kieron gasped. "*I kill you?*" He caught the girl's hair and pulled her head back so that her features would catch the faint glow of light from the city below. "Who are you, hellcat?"

The light outlined his own features and the Arms of Valkyr on the clasp of his cloak at his throat. The girl's eyes widened. Slowly the tenseness went out of her and she relaxed against him.

"Kieron! Kieron of Valkyr!"

KIERON was still alert for some trick. Landor could have hired a female assassin just as well as a man.

"You know me?" he asked cautiously.

"*Know* you!" She laughed suddenly, and it was a silvery sound in the night. "I loved you . . . beast!"

"By the Seven Hells, you speak in riddles! Who are you?" the Valkyr demanded irritably.

"And I thought you had come to kill me," mused the girl in self-reproach. "My own Kieron!"

"I'm not your Kieron or anyone else's, Lady," said Kieron rather stiffly, "and you'd better explain why you were watching me in the Hall of Emperors before I'll let you go."

"My father warned me that you would forget me. I did not think you would be so cruel," she taunted.

"I knew your father?"

"Well enough, I think."

"I've had a hundred wenches—and known some of their fathers, too. You can't expect me to . . ."

"Not *this* wench, Valkyr!" the girl exploded furiously.

The tone carried such command that Kieron involuntarily stepped back, but still keeping the girl's hands pinned to her sides.

"If you had spoken so on Kaidor, I'd have had the skin stripped from your back, outlawed savage!" she cried.

Kaidor! Kieron felt the blood drain away from his face. This, then, was . . . Alys.

"Ha! So you remember now! Kaidor you can recall, but you have forgotten me! Kieron, you always were a beast!"

Kieron felt a smile spreading across his face. It was good to smile again. And it was good to know that Alys was . . . safe.

"Highness . . ."

"Don't 'Highness' me!"

"Alys, then. Forgive me. I could not have known you. After all it has been eight years . . ."

"And there have been a hundred wenches . . ." mimicked the girl angrily.

Kieron grinned. "There really haven't been that many. I boasted."

"Any would be too many!"

"You haven't changed, Alys, except that you . . ."

"Have grown so? Spare me that!" She glared at him, eyes flaming in the shadows. Then suddenly she was laughing again, a silvery laugh that hung like a bright thread in the soft tapestry of night sounds. "Oh, Kieron, it is good to see you again!"

"I thought to hear from you, Alys, when we reached Earth—but there was nothing. No word of any kind. I was told you were in seclusion still mourning Gilmer."

Alys bowed her head. "I will never stop mourning him." She looked up, her eyes suddenly bright with unshed tears. "Nor will you. I saw you kneeling inside. I thought then that it might be you. No one kneels to Gilmer now but the old comrades." She walked to the balustrade and stood looking out over the lights of the Imperial City. Kieron watched the play of emotions over her face, caught suddenly by her beauty.

"I tried to reach you, Kieron—tried hard. But my servants have been taken from me since I was caught spying on Ivane. And I'm kept under cover now, permitted out only after dark—and then only on the Palace grounds. Ivane has convinced Toran that I'm dangerous. The people like me because I was father's favorite. My poor stupid little brother! How that woman rules him . . .!"

Kieron was aghast. "You spied on Ivane? In heaven's name, why?"

"That woman is a born plotter, Kieron. She isn't satisfied with a Consort's coronet. She's brewing something. Emmissaries have come to her from certain of the star-kings and *others* . . ."

"Others?"

Alys' voice was hushed. "A warlock, Kieron! He has been seeing Ivane privately for more than a year. An awful man!"

Superstition stirred like a quickening devil inside the Valkyr. The shuddering horror of the dark and bloody tales he had heard all his life about the warlocks who clung to the knowledge of the Great Destroyer rose like a wave of blackness within him.

Alys felt the same dark tide rising in her. She moved closer to Kieron, her slim body trembling slightly against his. "The people would tear Ivane to pieces if they knew," she whispered.

"You saw this warlock?" asked Kieron, sick with dread.

Alys nodded soundlessly.

Kieron fought down his fears and wondered uneasily what Ivane's connection could be with such a pariah. The warlocks and witches were despised and feared above all other creatures in the Galaxy.

"His name?" Kieron asked.

"Geller. Geller of the Marshes. It is said that he is a conjurer of devils . . . and that he can create homunculi! Out of the very filth of the marshes! Oh, Kieron!" Alys shuddered.

An awful plan was forming in Kieron's mind. He was thinking that Ivane must be stripped of the sigils and powers of this devil-man. With such powers at her command there might be nothing impossible of attainment. Even the crown of the Imperium itself . . .

"Where," Kieron asked slowly, "can this warlock be found?"

"On the street of the Black Flame, in the city of Neg . . . on Kalgan."

"Kalgan!" Kieron's heart contracted. Was there a connection? Kalgan! What had Ivane to do with that lonely planet beyond the dark veil of the Coalsack? Was it coincidence? Out of all the thousands of worlds in space . . . Kalgan.

"Is there something wrong, Kieron? You know this man?"

Kieron shook his head. It had suddenly become more than imperative that he go to Kalgan. The mystery of the Imperial Consort's connection with a warlock of Kalgan must be unraveled. And the star-kings were gathering . . .

The Valkyr was suddenly taken with a new and different fear. If Alys had spied on Ivane, then she must be in danger here. Ivane would never tolerate interference with her plans from Gilmer's daughter.

"Alys, are you a prisoner here?"

"More, I'm afraid," the girl said sadly. "I'm a reminder to Toran of the days of our father. One that he would like to eliminate, I think."

KIERON studied her in the starlight. His eyes sought the thick golden hair that brushed her shoulders, the glittering metallic skirt that hung low on her hips, outlining the slim thighs. He watched the graceful line of her unadorned throat, the bare shoulders and breasts, the small waist, the flat, firm stomach—all revealed by the studied nakedness of the fashions of the Inner Marches. This was no child. The thought of her in danger shook him badly.

"Toran would not dare harm you, Alys," said Kieron uncertainly. There had been a time when he could have said such a thing with perfect assurance, but since the death of Gilmer, the Imperial City was like an over-civilized jungle—full of beasts of prey.

"No, Toran wouldn't . . . alone," said Alys; "but there are Ivane and Landor." She laughed, suddenly gay; her eyes, seeking Kieron's, were shining. "But not now! You are here, Kieron!"

The Valkyr felt his heart contract. "Alys," he said softly, "I leave Earth to-night. For Kalgan."

"For Kalgan, Kieron?" Alys' eyes widened. "To seek that warlock?"

"For another reason, Alys." Kieron paused uneasily. It was hard to speak to Gilmer of Kaidor's daughter about rebellion. Yet he could not lie to her. He temporized.

"I have business with the lord of Kalgan," he said.

Alys' face was shadowed and her voice when she spoke was sad. "Do the star-kings gather, Kieron? Have they had all they can stand of Toran's foolish rule?"

Kieron nodded wordlessly.

The girl flared up with a sudden imperious anger. "That fool! He is letting the favorites drive the Empire to ruin!" She looked up at Kieron pleadingly. "Promise me one thing, Kieron."

"If I can."

"That you will not commit yourself to any rebellion until we have spoken again."

"Alys, I . . ."

"Oh, Kieron! Promise me! If there is no other way, then fight the Imperial House. But give me one chance to save what my father and his father died for . . .!"

"And mine," added Kieron sombrely.

"You know that if there is no other way, I won't try to dissuade you. But while you are on Kalgan, I'll speak to Toran. Please, Kieron, promise me that Valkyr will not rebel until we have tried everything." Her eyes shone with passion. "Then if it comes to war, I'll ride by your side!"

"Done, Alys," said Kieron slowly.

"But take care when you speak to Toran. Remember there is danger here for you." He wondered briefly what Freka the Unknown would think of his sudden reluctance to commit the hundred spaceships and five thousand warriors of Valkyr to the coming rebellion. A thought struck him and quickly he discarded it. For just an instant he had wondered if Geller of the Marshes and the mysterious Freka the Unknown might be the same . . . Stranger things had happened. But Alys had described Geller as old, and Freka was known to be a six-and-one-half foot warrior, the perfect 'type' of the star-king caste.

"One thing more, Alys," Kieron said: "I will leave one of my vessels here for your use. Nevitta and a company will remain, too. Keep them by you. They will guard you with their lives." He slipped

his arm about her, holding her to him.

"Nevitta?" Alys said with a slow smile. "Nevitta of the yellow braids and the great sword? I remember him."

"The braids are greying, but the sword is as long as ever. He can guard you for me, and keep you safe."

The girl's smile deepened at the words 'for me' but Kieron did not notice. He was deep in planning. "Be very careful, Alys. And watch out for Landor."

"Yes, Kieron," the girl breathed meekly. She looked up at the tall outlaw warrior's face, lips parted.

But Kieron was looking up at the stars of the Empire, and there was uneasiness in his heart. He tightened his arm about Alys, holding her closer to him as though to protect her from the hot gaze of those fiery stars.

III

THE spaceship was ancient, yet the mysterious force of the Great Destroyer chained within the sealed coils between the hulls drove it with unthinkable speed across the star-shot darkness. The interior was close and smoky, for the only light came from oil lamps turned low to slow the fouling of the air. Once, there had been light without fire in the thousand-foot hulls, but the tiny orbs set into the ceilings had failed for they were not of a kind with the force in the sealed, eternal coils.

On the lower decks, the horses of the small party of Valkyr warriors aboard stomped the steel deck-plates, impatient in their close confinement; while in the tiny bubble of glass at the very prow of the ancient vessel, two shamen of the hereditary caste of Navigators drove the pulsing starship toward the spot beyond the veil of the Coalsack where their astrolabes and armillary spheres told them that the misty globe of Kalgan lay.

Many men—risking indictment as warlocks or sorcerers—had tried to probe the secrets of the Great Destroyer and compute the speed of these mighty space-craft of antiquity. Some had even claimed a speed of 100,000 miles per hour for them. But since the starships made the voyage from Earth to the agricultural worlds of Proxima Centauri in slightly less than twenty-eight hours, such calculations would place the nearest star-system an

astounding *two million eight hundred thousand* miles from Earth—a figure that was as absurd to all Navigators as it was inconceivable to laymen.

The great spaceship bearing the Warlord of Valkyr's blazon solidified into reality near Kalgan as its great velocity diminished. It circled the planet to kill speed and nosed down into the damp air of the grey world. The high cloud cover passed, it slanted down into slightly clearer air. Kalgan did not rotate: in its slow orbit around the red giant parent star, the planet turned first one face, and then another to the slight heat of its sun. Great oceans covered the poles, and the central land mass was like a craggy girdle of rock and soil around the bulging equator. Only in the twilight zone was life endurable, and the city of Neg, stronghold of Freka the Unknown, was the only urban grouping on the planet.

Neg lay sullen in the eternal twilight when at last Kieron's spaceship landed outside the gates and the debarkation of his retinue had begun; the spaceport, however, was ablaze with flares and torches, and the lord of Kalgan had sent a corps of drummers—signal honors—to greet the visiting star-king. The hot, misty night air throbbed with the beat of the huge kettledrums, and weapons and jewelled harness flashed in the yellow light of the flares.

At last the debarkation was complete, and Kieron and his warriors were led by a torch-bearing procession of soldiery into the fortified city of Neg—along ancient cobbled streets—through small crowded squares—and finally to the Citadel of Neg itself. The residence of Freka the Unknown, Lord of Kalgan.

The people they passed were a silent, sullen lot. Dull, brutish faces. The faces of slaves and serfs held in bondage by fear and force. These people, Kieron reflected, would go mad in a carnival of destruction if the heavy hand of their lord should falter.

He turned his attention from the people of Neg to the massive Citadel. It was a powerful keep with high walls and turreted outworks. It spoke of Kalgan's bloody history in every squat, functional line. A history of endless rebellion and uprising, of coups and upheavals. Warrior after warrior had set himself up as ruler of this sullen world only to fall before the assaults of his own vassals. It had ever

been the policy of the Imperial Government never to interfere with these purely local affairs. It was felt that out of the crucibles of domestic strife would arise the best fighting men, and they, in turn, could serve the Imperium. As long as Kalgan produced its levy of fighting men and spaceships, no one on Earth cared about the local government. So Kalgan wallowed in blood.

Out of the last nightmare had come Freka. He had risen rapidly to power on Kalgan—and *stayed* in power. Hated by his people, he nevertheless ruled harshly, for that was his way. Kieron had been told that this warrior who had sprung out of nowhere was different from other men. The Imperial courtiers claimed that he cared nothing for wine or women, and that he loved only battle. It would take such a man, thought Kieron studying the Citadel, to take and hold a world like Kalgan. It would take such a man to want it!

If Freka of Kalgan loved bloodshed, he would be happy when this coming council of star-kings ended, the Valkyr reflected moodily. He knew himself how near to rebellion he was, and the other lords of the Outer Marches, the lords of Anriga, Doorn, Quintain, Helia—all were ready to strike the Imperial crown from Toran's foolish head.

KIERON was escorted with his warriors to a luxurious suite within the Citadel. Freka, he was informed, regretted his inability to greet him personally, but intended to meet all the gathered star-kings in the Great Hall within twelve hours. Meanwhile, there would be entertainment for the visiting warriors, and the hospitality of Kalgan. Which hospitality, claimed the hawk-faced steward pridefully, was without peer in the known Universe!

An imp of perversity stirred in Kieron. He found that he did not completely trust Freka of Kalgan. There was a premeditated cold-bloodedness about this whole business of the star-kings' grievance council that alerted him to danger. There should have been less smoothness and efficiency in the way the visitors were handled, Kieron thought illogically, remembering the troubles he, himself, had gone to whenever outworld rulers had visited Valkyr. He was suddenly glad that he had warned Nevitta to use extreme caution should it be necessary to bring Alys to Kalgan. It

was possible he was being over-suspicious, but he could not forget that Alys herself had seen a warlock from Kalgan in familiar conversation with the woman really to blame for the danger that smouldered red among the worlds of the Empire.

The drums told the Valkyr that the other star-kings were arriving. Torches flared in the courtyards of the Citadel, and the hissing roar of spaceships landing told of the eagles gathering.

Through the long, featureless twilight, the sounds continued. Freka made no appearances, but the promised entertainment was forthcoming and lavish. Food and wine in profusion were brought to the apartments of the Valkyrs. Musicians and minstrels came too, to sing and play the love songs and warchants of ancient Valkyr while the warriors roared approval.

Kieron sat on the high seat reserved for him and watched the dancing yellow light of the flambeaux light up the stone rooms and play across the ruddy faces of his warriors as they drank and gamed and quarreled.

Dancing girls were sent them, and the Valkyrs howled with savage pleasure as the naked bodies, glistening with scented oils, gyrated in the barbaric rhythms of the sword dances, steel whirring in bright arcs above the tawny heads. The long, gloomy twilight passed unregretted in the warm, flame-splashed closeness of the Citadel. Kieron watched thoughtfully as more women and fiery vintages were brought into the merrymaking. The finest wines and the best women were passed hand to hand over the heads of laughing warriors to Kieron's place, and he drank deeply of both. The wines were heady, the full lips of the sybaritic houris bittersweet, but Kieron smiled inwardly—if Freka the Unknown sought to bring him into the gathering of the star-kings drunk and satiated and amenable to suggestion, the lord of Kalgan knew little of the capacity of the men of the Edge.

The hours passed and revelry filled the Citadel of Neg. Life on the outer worlds was harsh, and the gathering warriors took full measure of the pleasures placed at their disposal by the lord of Kalgan. The misty, eternal dusk rang with the drinking songs and battle-cries, the quarreling and love-making of warriors from a dozen outworld planets. Each star-king, Kieron knew, was being entertained separately, plied with

wine and woman-flesh until the hour for the meeting came.

The sands had run their course in the glass five times before the trumpets blared through the Citadel, calling the lords to the meeting. Kieron left his men to enjoy themselves, and with an attendant in the harness of Kalgan made his way toward the Great Hall.

Through dark passageways that reeked of ancient violence, by walls hung with tapestries and antique weapons, they went; over flagstones worn smooth by generations. This keep had been old when the reconquering heirs to the Thousand Emperors rode their chargers into the Great Hall and dictated their peace terms to the interregal lords of Kalgan.

THE hall was a vast, vaulted stone room filled with the smoky heat of torches and many bodies. It teemed with bejewelled warriors, star-kings, warlords, aides and attendants. For just a moment the lord of Valkyr regretted having come into the impressive gathering alone. Yet it was unimportant. These men were—for the most part—his peers and friends; the warrior kings of the Edge.

Odo of Helia was there, filling the room with his great laughter; and Theron, the Lord of Auriga; Kleph of Quintain; and others. Many others. Kieron saw the white mane of his father's friend Eric, the Warlord of Doorn, the great Red Sun beyond the Horsehead Nebula. Here was an aggregation of might to give even a Galactic Emperor pause. The warlike worlds of the Edge, gathered on Kalgan to decide the issue of war against the uneasy crown of Imperial Earth.

Questions coursed through Kieron's mind as he stood among the star-kings. Alys—pleading with Toran—what success could she have against the insidious power of the Consort? Was Alys in danger? And there was Geller, the mysterious warlock of the Marshes. Kieron felt he must seek out the man. There were questions that only Geller could answer. Yet at the thought of a warlock—a familiar of the Great Destroyer—Kieron's blood ran cold.

The Valkyr looked about him. That there was power enough here to crush the forces of Earth, there was no doubt. But what then? When Toran was stripped of his power, who would wear the crown?

The Empire was a necessity—without it the dark ages of the Interregnum would fall again. For four generations the mantle of shadows had hovered over the youngling Second Empire. Not even the most savage wanted a return of the lost years of isolation. The Empire must live. But the Empire would need a titular head. If not Toran, the foolish weak boy, then who? Kieron's suspicions stirred. . . .

A rumble of tympani announced the entrance of the host. The murmuring voices grew still. Freka the Unknown had entered the Great Hall.

Kieron stared. The man was—magnificent! The tall figure was muscled like a statue from the Dawn Age; sinews rippling under the golden hide like oiled machinery, grace and power in every movement. A mane of hair the color of fire framed a face of classic purity—ascetic, almost inhuman in its perfection. The pale eyes that swept the assemblage were like drops of molten silver. Hot, but with a cold heat that seared with an icy touch. Kieron shivered. This man was already half a god. . . .

Yet there was something in Freka that stirred resentment in the Valkyr. Some indefinable lack that was sensed rather than seen. Kieron knew he looked upon a magnificent star-king, but there was no warmth in the man.

Kieron fought down the unreasonable dislike. It was not his way to judge men so emotionally. *Perhaps*, thought the Valkyr, *I imagine the coldness*. But it was there!

Yet when Freka spoke, the feeling vanished, and Kieron felt himself transported by the timbre and resonant power of the voice.

"Star-kings of the Empire!" Freka cried, and the sound of his words rolled out over the gathering like a wave, gaining power even as he continued: "For more than a hundred years you and your fathers have fought for the glory and gain of the Great Throne! Under Gilmer of Kaidor you carried the gonfalon of Imperial Earth to the Edge and planted it there under the light of Andromeda itself! Your blood was shed and your treasure spent for the new Emperors! And what is your reward? *The heavy hand of a fool!* Your people writhe under the burden of excessive taxation—your women starve and your children are sold into slavery! You are in

bondage to a foolish boy who squats like a toad on the Great Throne . . ."

KIERON listened breathlessly as Freka of Kalgan wove a web of half-truths around the assembled warriors. The compelling power of the man was astounding.

"The worlds writhe in the grip of an idiot! Helia, Doorn, Auriga, Valkyr, Quintain . . ." He called the roll of the warrior worlds. "Yes, and Kalgan, too! There is not enough wealth in the Universe to satiate Toran and the Great Throne! And the Court laughs at our complaints! At us! The star-kings who are the fists of the Empire! How long will we endure it? How long will we maintain Toran on a throne that he is too weak to hold?"

Toran, thought Kieron grimly, always Toran. Never a word of Ivane or Landor or the favorites who twisted Toran around their fingers.

Freka's voice dropped low and he leaned out over the first row of upturned faces. "I call upon you—as you love your people and your freedom—to join with Kalgan and rid the Empire of this weakling and his money-grubbing and neglect!"

In the crowd, someone stirred. All but this one seemed hypnotized. It was old Eric of Doorn who stepped forward.

"You speak treason! You brought us here to discuss grievances, and you preach rebellion and treason, I say!" he shouted angrily.

Freka turned cold eyes on the old warrior.

"If this is treason," he said ominously, "it is the Emperor's treason—not ours."

Eric of Doorn seemed to wilt under the icy gaze of those inhuman eyes. Kieron watched him step back into the circle of his followers, fear in his aging face. There was a power in Freka to quell almost any insurrection here, thought the Valkyr uneasily. He, himself, was bound by the promise he had made to Alys, but it was only that that kept him from casting in his lot with the compelling lord of Kalgan. Such a feeling was unreason itself, he knew, and he fought against it, drawing on his reserves of information to strengthen his resolve to obstruct Freka if he could. Yet it was easy to understand how this strange man had sprung out of obscurity and made himself master of Kalgan. Freka was a creature made for leadership.

Kieron stood away from the crowd and forced himself to speak. All his earlier suspicions were growing like a suffocating cloud within him. Someone was being fooled and used, and it was *not* the lord of Kalgan!

"You, Freka!" he cried, and the lords turned to listen. "You shout of getting rid of Toran—but what do you offer in his place?"

Freka's eyes were like steel now, glinting dully in the light of the wall-torches.

"Not myself. Is that what you feared?" The fine mouth curled scornfully. "I ask no man to lay down his life so that I may take for myself the Great Throne and the sable mantle of Emperor! I renounce here and now any claim to the Imperial Crown! When the time is right, I will make my wishes known."

The crowd of star-kings murmured approvingly. Freka had won them.

"A vote!" someone cried. "Those who are with Freka and against Toran! A vote!"

Swords leaped from scabbards and glittered in the torchlight while the chamber rang to a savage cheer. Here was war and loot to satisfy the savage heart! The sack of Imperial Earth herself! Even old Eric of Doorn's sword was reluctantly raised. Kieron alone remained silent, sword sheathed.

Freka looked down at him coldly.

"Well, Valkyr? Do you ride with us?"

"I need more time to consider," said Kieron carefully.

Freka's laughter was like a lash. "Time! Time to worry about risking his skin! Valkyr needs time!"

Kieron felt his quick anger surging. The blood pounded in his temples, throbbing, pulsing, goading him to fight. His hand closed on the hilt of his sword and it slipped half out of the sheath. But Kieron caught himself. There was something sinister in this deliberate attempt to ruin him—to brand him a coward before his peers. A man faced two choices here, apparently; follow Freka into rebellion, or be branded craven. Kieron glared into the cold eyes of the Kalgan lord. The temptation to challenge him was strong—as strong as Kieron's whole background and training in the harsh warrior-code of the Edge. But he could not. Not yet. There were too many irons in the fire to be watched. There

was Alys and her plea to Toran. There was the plight of his people. He could not risk the danger to himself of driving a blade through Freka's throat, no matter how his blood boiled with rage.

He turned on his heel and strode from the Great Hall, the laughter of Freka and the star-kings ringing mockingly in his ears.

IV

KIERON awoke in darkness. Of the fire on the hearth, only embers remained and the stone rooms were silent but for the sound of sleeping men. The single Valkyr sentry was at his elbow, whispering him into wakefulness. Kieron threw back the fur coverlets and swung his feet over the edge of the low couch.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nevitta, sir."

"Nevitta! Here?" Kieron sprang to his feet, fully awake now. "Is there a woman with him?"

"A slave-girl, sir. They wait in the outer chamber."

Kieron reached for his harness and weapons, threading his way through his sleeping men. In the dimly lit antechamber, Nevitta stood near the muffled figure of Alys. Kieron went immediately to the girl, and she threw back her hood, baring her golden head to the torchlight. Her eyes were bright with the pleasure of seeing Kieron again, but there was anger in them, too. The lord of Valkyr knew at once that she had not succeeded with Toran.

"What happened, Nevitta?"

"An attempt was made on the little princess' life, sir."

"What?" Kieron felt the blood drain from his face.

"As I say, Kieron." The old Valkyr's face was grim. "We had to fight our way out of the Palace."

"I never had a chance to speak to Toran," the girl said sombrely. "It was all that could be done to reach the spaceship. Even the Janizaries tried to stop us. Two of your men died for me, Kieron."

"Who did this thing?" asked Kieron ominously.

"The men who attacked the princess' quarters," said Nevitta deliberately, "wore the harness of Kalgan."

That hit Kieron like a physical blow . . .

hard. "*Kalgan!* And you brought her *here?* You fool, Nevitta!"

The old Valkyr nodded agreement. "Yes, Kieron. Fool is the proper word . . ."

"No!" Alys spoke up imperiously. "It was my command that brought us here. I insisted."

"By the Seven Hells! Why?" demanded Kieron. "Why here? You could have been safe on Valkyr! I know it was my order to bring you here, but after what happened . . ."

"The princess would not hear of seeking safety, Kieron," said Nevitta. "When Kalgan proved its treachery by trying to assassinate her, she could think only of your danger here . . . unwarned. She would risk her life to bring you this news, Kieron."

Kieron turned to face the girl. She looked up at him, eyes bright, lips parted.

"What could make a princess risk her life . . ." Kieron began numbly.

"Kieron . . ." The girl breathed his name softly. "I was so afraid for you."

The Valkyr reached slowly for the clasp of her cloak and unfastened it. The heavy mantle dropped unnoticed to the flagstones. Alys stood, swaying slightly, parted lips inviting. Kieron watched the throbbing pulse in her white throat and felt his own pounding. He took a step toward her, his arms closing about her yielding suppleness. His mouth sought her lips.

Unnoticed, Nevitta slipped from the antechamber and silently closed the door after him . . .

KIERON stood before the arched window, staring out into the eternal, misty dusk of Kalgan, his heart heavy. Behind him, Alys lay on the low couch. Her bright hair lay in tumbled profusion about her face as she watched her lover at the window. Kieron turned to look at her, feeling the impact of her warm beauty. He began to pace the floor, wracking his brains for a lead to his next move in the subtle war of treachery and intrigue that had taken shape around him.

He had ordered his men ready for attack, but for the moment there was little need for that kind of vigilance. What was needed was more information. Carefully, he marshalled what few facts he had at his disposal.

The connection between Freka and the plotters in the Imperial City that he had

suspected was proved at last by the attempt on Alys' life by men of Kalgan. The star-kings were being used to fight a battle not their own. But whose? Freka's . . . or Ivane's? No matter which, they were being tricked into striking the Imperial Crown from Toran's head, and the gain to them and their people would be—more oppression.

The treatment he, himself, had received in the Imperial Court made sense now. Landor sought to drive him into the arms of Freka's revolt. Only Alys had spared him.

Now, the star-kings must be warned. But by the code of the Edge, Kieron must prove to them that he was not the craven coward that Freka's laughter had branded him. And he needed *proof*. Proof of the monstrous structure of treachery and intrigue that had sprung up out of a woman's cupidity and an unknown star-king's cold inhumanity.

Kieron stared moodily down into the damp courtyard beneath the open window. In the early dawn it was deserted. Then, quite suddenly, there was activity in the walled-in square. An officer of the Citadel guard escorted a heavily cloaked figure into the yard, and with every evidence of great respect, withdrew. The solitary figure paced the wet cobbles nervously.

Who, wondered Kieron, would be treated with such obvious obsequiousness and yet left in a back courtyard to await the summons of Freka of Kalgan? A sudden thought struck him. It could be only someone who should not be seen by the star-kings and their attendants that filled the Citadel of Neg to overflowing.

Kieron studied the cloaked nobleman with renewed interest. It seemed to him that he had seen that mincing walk before . . .

Landor!

Kieron flung open the door to the outer chamber. His startled men gathered about him. Alys was on her feet behind him. He signalled for Nevitta and four men to enter.

"Nevitta! Tear down that wall tapestry and cut it into shreds . . . Alys, tie the strips together and make a rope of it! Make certain the knots are secure enough to bear a man's weight . . . That's Landor down there!"

Kicking off his spurred boots, Kieron eased himself over the ledge of the window.

The courtyard was thirty feet below, but the ancient walls of the Citadel were rough and full of the ornate projections of Interregal architecture. Kieron let himself down, feeling the mist wet on his face. Twice he almost lost his footing and pitched to the courtyard floor. Alys stared down at him from the window, white-faced.

He was ten feet from the bottom when Landor looked up. Recognition was instant. There was a moment of stunned silence, and Kieron dropped the remaining distance to land cat-like on his feet, blade in hand.

"Kieron!" Landor's face was grey.

THE Valkyr advanced purposefully. "Yes, Landor! Kieron! I wasn't supposed to see you here, was I? And you don't dare raise an outcry or the others will see you, too! That would raise quite a smell in the Consort's pretty brew, wouldn't it?"

Landor shrank back, away from the gleaming blade in Kieron's hand.

"Draw, Landor," said Kieron softly. "Draw now, or I'll kill you where you stand."

In a panic, the First Lord of Space drew his sword. He knew himself to be no match for the Valkyr star-king, and at the first touch of blades, he turned and fled for the gate. He banged hard against the heavy panels. The gate was locked. Kieron followed him deliberately.

"Cry for help, Landor," Kieron suggested with a short, hard laugh. "The place is full of fighting-men."

Landor was wild-eyed. "Why do you want to kill me, Kieron," he cried hoarsely; "what have I done to you . . .?"

"You've taxed my people and insulted me, and if that were not enough there would still be your treachery with Freka—tricking me and the others into rebellion so that Ivane can seize the crown! That's more than enough reason to kill you. Besides . . ." Kieron smiled grimly, "I just don't like you, Landor. I'd enjoy spilling some of your milky blood."

"Kieron! I swear, Kieron . . ."

"Save it, dancing master!" Kieron touched Landor's loosely held weapon with his own. "Guard yourself!"

Landor uttered an animal cry of desperation and lunged clumsily at the Valkyr. Kieron's sword made a glittering encircle-

ment and the First Lord's weapon clattered on the cobblestones twenty feet away.

Kieron's eyes were cold as he advanced on the now thoroughly terrorized courtier. "Kneel down, Landor. A lackey should always die on his knees."

The First Lord threw himself to the cobbles, his arms around the outworlder's knees. He was grey with fright and babbling for mercy, his eyes tightly shut. Kieron reversed his sword and brought the heavy hilt down sharply on Landor's head. The courtier sighed and pitched forward. Kieron sheathed his weapon and picked the unconscious man up like a sack of meal. Time was short. The guards would be returning to escort Landor to Freka. Kieron picked up the courtier's fallen sword. There must be no sign of struggle in the courtyard.

The Valkyr carried Landor over to where Alys and Nevitta had lowered their improvised rope. He trussed Landor up like a butchered boar and called to them. "Haul him up!"

Landor disappeared into the window and the rope came down again. Kieron climbed hand over hand after the vanished courtier. Within seconds he stood among his warriors again, and the courtyard was empty.

"LANDOR!" Kieron splashed wine in the unconscious man's face. "Landor, wake up!"

The courtier stirred and opened his eyes. Immediately they filmed with fear. A hostile circle of faces looked down at him. Kieron, his dark eyes flaming. Alys . . . the great red face of Nevitta, framed by the winged helmet . . . other savage looking Valkyrs. It was to Landor a scene from the legendary Seventh Hell of the Great Destroyer.

"If you want to live, talk," said Kieron. "What are you doing here on Kalgan? It must be a message of importance you carry. Ivane would have sent someone else if it weren't."

"I . . . I carry no message, Kieron."

Kieron nodded to Nevitta who drew his dagger and placed it against Landor's throat.

"We have no time for lies, Landor," said Kieron.

To emphasize the point, Nevitta pressed the blade tighter against the pulse in the First Lord's neck. Landor screamed.

"Don't . . .!"

"Talk—or I'll cut the gizzard out of you!" Nevitta growled.

"All right! All right! But take that knife away . . .!"

"Ivane sent you here."

Landor nodded soundlessly.

"Why?"

"I . . . I . . . was to tell Freka that . . . that his men failed to . . . to . . ."

"To kill me!" finished Alys angrily.

"What else?"

"I . . . was also to tell him that the rest of the plan was . . . was . . . carried out . . . successfully."

"Damn you, don't talk in riddles!" Kieron said. "What 'plan'?"

"The . . . the Emperor is dead," Landor blurted, eyes wild with terror. "But not by my hand! I swear it! Not by my hand!"

Alys choked back a cry of pain.

"Toran! Poor . . . Toran . . ."

Kieron took the terrified courtier by the throat and shook him.

"You filthy swine! Who did it? *Who killed the Emperor?*"

"Ivane!" gasped Landor. "The people do not know he is dead and she awaits the star-king's invasion to proclaim herself Empress! . . . In the god's name, Kieron, don't kill me! I speak the truth!"

"Freka helped plan this?" demanded Kieron.

"He is Ivane's man," stammered Landor, "but I know nothing of him! Nothing, Kieron! The warlock Geller brought him to Ivane five years ago . . . that is all I know!"

Geller of the Marshes . . . again. Kieron felt the awful dread seeping through his anger. Somehow the connection between Geller and Freka must be discovered. Somehow . . .!

Kieron turned away from the terrified Landor. The picture was shaping now. Freka and Ivane. The star-king's rebellion. Toran . . . murdered.

"Keep this hound under guard!" ordered Kieron.

Landor was led away, shaken and weak.

"Nevitta!"

"Sir?"

"You and the princess will go back to the ship as you came. She must be taken to safety at once. As soon as that pig is missed, we'll have visitors . . ."

"No, Kieron! I won't go!" cried Alys.

"You must. If you are captured on Kalgan now it will mean a *carte blanche* for Ivane."

"But then you must come!"

"I can't. If I tried to leave here now, Freka would detain me by force. I know his plans." He turned again to Nevitta. "She goes with you, Nevitta. By force if necessary."

"Return to Valkyr and gather the tribes. We can do nothing without men at our backs. One of the ships will remain here with me and the men. We will try to get clear after we are certain that—" He looked over at the slim girl, his eyes sombre—"that Her Majesty is safe."

The Valkyr warriors in the room straightened, a subtle change in their expression as they watched Alys. A gulf had suddenly opened between this girl and their chieftain. They felt it too. One by one they dropped to their knees before her. Alys made a protesting gesture, her eyes bright with tears. She saw the chasm opening, and fought it futilely. But when Kieron, too, went to his knees, she knew it was so. In one fleeting moment, they had changed from lover and beloved to sovereign and vassal.

She forced back the tears and raised her head proudly; as Galactic Empress, Heiress to the Thousand Emperors, she accepted the homage of her fighting men.

"My lord of Valkyr," she said in a low, unsteady voice. "My love and affection for you—and these warriors will never be forgotten. If we live . . ."

Kieron rose to his full height, naked sword extended in his hands.

"Your Imperial Majesty," he spoke the words formally and slowly, regretting what was gone. "The men of Valkyr are yours. To the death."

KIERON watched Nevitta and Alys vanish down the long, gloomy hall outside the Valkyr chambers—to all appearances a warrior chieftain and his slave-girl ordered away by their master. Even then, thought Kieron bleakly, there was danger. He saw them pass one sentry, two . . . three . . . They turned the corner and were gone. Kieron's hopes and fears riding with them.

Already, there were sounds of confusion in the Citadel of Neg. Men were searching for the vanished Lander. Searching quietly reflected Kieron with grim satisfaction, for

the visiting star-kings must not know that Freka the Unknown held familiar audience with the Imperial First Lord of Space. Spur of the moment hunting parties and entertainments were keeping the visitors occupied while the Kalgan soldiery searched.

Kieron weighed his chances of escape and found them small indeed. They dared not stir from their quarters in the Citadel until the roar of Nevitta's spaceship told that the Empress was safely away. And meanwhile, the search for Lander drew nearer.

An hour passed, the sand in the glass running with agonizing slowness. Once Kieron thought he heard the beat of hooves on the drawbridge of the Citadel, but he could not be certain.

Two hours. Kieron paced the floor of the Valkyr chambers, his twelve remaining warriors armed, alert, watching him. Nervously he fingered the hilt of his sword.

Another hour in the grey, eternal twilight. Still no sound of a spaceship rising. Kieron's anxiety grew to gargantuan proportions. The search for Lander came closer steadily. Kieron could hear the soldiers tramping the stone corridors and causeways of the Citadel.

Suddenly there was a knock at the barred door to the Valkyrs' quarters.

"Open! In the name of the lord of Kalgan!"

A Valkyr near the door replied languidly. "Our master sleeps. Go away."

The knocking continued. "It is regretted that we must disturb him, but a slave of the household has escaped. We must search for him."

"Would you disturb the War lord of Valkyr's repose for a slave, barbarians?" demanded the warrior at the door in a hurt tone of voice. "Go away."

The officer in the hallway was beginning to lose patience.

"Open, I say! Or we'll break in!"

"Do," offered the Valkyr pleasantly. "I have a sword that has been too long dry."

How Lander must be sweating in that back room, Kieron thought wryly, thinking that the Valkyrs would rather kill him than let his message reach Freka. But Lander's death would serve no useful purpose now. Time! Time was needed. Time enough to let Nevitta get Alys out of danger!

Kieron stepped to the door, hoping that

some warriors of the Outer Marches might possibly be within earshot and catch the implication of his words. "Kieron of Valkyr speaks!" he cried. "We have Landor of Earth here! Landor, the First Lord—is *that* the slave you seek?"

But the only response was the sudden crash of a ram against the panels of the wooden door. Kieron prepared to fight. Still, no sound of a spaceship rising . . .

The door collapsed, and a flood of Kalgan warriors poured into the room, weapons flashing.

Savagely, the Valkyrs closed with them, and the air rang with the metallic clash of steel. No mercy was asked and none was given. Kieron cut a circle of death with his long, outworld weapon, the fighting blood of a hundred generations of warriors singing in his ears. The savage chant of the Edge rose above the confused sounds of battle. A man screamed in agony as his arm was severed by a blow from a Valkyr blade, and he waved the stump desperately, splattering the milling men with dark blood. A Valkyr warrior went down, locked in a death-embrace with a Kalgan warrior, driving his dagger into his enemy again and again even as he died. Kieron crossed swords with a guardsman, forcing him backward until the Kalgan slipped on the flagstones made slippery with blood and went down with a sword-cut from throat to groin.

The Valkyrs were cutting down their opponents, but numbers were beginning to tell. Two Valkyrs went down before fresh onslaughts. Another, and another, and still another. Kieron felt the burning touch of a dagger wound. He looked down and saw that a thrust from someone in the *melee* had slashed him to the bone. His side was slick with blood and the white ribs showed along the ten inch gash.

Now, Kieron stood back to back with his two remaining companions. The other Valkyrs were down, lying still on the bloody floor. Kieron caught a glimpse of Freka's tall figure behind his guardsman and he lunged for him, suddenly blind with fury. Two Kalgan guards engaged him and he lost sight of Freka. A Valkyr went down with a thrust in the belly. Kieron took another wound in the arm. He could not tell how badly hurt he was, but faintness from the loss of blood was telling on him. It was getting hard to see clearly. Dark-

ness seemed to be flickering like a black flame just beyond his range of vision. He saw Freka again and tried to reach him. Again he failed, blocked by a Kalgan soldier. A thrown sword whistled past him and imbedded itself in the last Valkyr's chest. The man sank to the floor in silence, and Kieron fought alone.

He saw the blade of an officer descending, but he could not ward it off. And as it fell, a great hissing roar sounded beyond the open window. Kieron almost smiled. Alys was safe . . .

He lifted his sword to parry the descending stroke. Weakened, the best he could do was deflect it slightly. The blade caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head and he staggered to his knees. He tried to raise his weapon again . . . tried to fight on . . . but he could not. Slowly, reluctantly, he sank to the floor as darkness welled up out of the bloody flagstones to engulf him . . .

V

KIERON stirred, the pulsing ache in his side piercing the reddish veil of unconsciousness. Under him, he could feel wet stones that stank of death and filth. He moved painfully, and the throbbing agony grew worse, making him teeter precariously between consciousness and the dark.

He was stiff and cold. Hurt badly, too, he thought vaguely. His wounds had not been tended. Very carefully, he opened his eyes. They told him what he had already known. He was in a dark cell, filthy and damp. A sick chill shook him. Teeth chattering, huddled on the stone floor, Kieron sank again into unconsciousness.

When he awoke again, he was burning with fever and a cold bowl of solidified, greasy gruel lay beside him. His tongue felt thick and swollen, but the sharp agony of his wounded side had subsided to a dull hurt. With a great effort, he dragged himself into a corner of the dungeon and propped himself up facing the iron-bound door.

His searching hands found that he had been stripped of his harness and weapons. He was naked, smeared with filth and dried blood. As he moved he felt a renewed flow of warmth flooding down from his torn

flank. The wound had reopened. Sweat was streaking the caked blood on his cheek. His mind wandered in a feverish delirium—a nightmare dream in which the tall, coldly arrogant figure of Freka seemed to fill all space and all time, Kieron's over-bright eyes glittered with animal hate...

Somehow, he felt that the hated Kalgan was nearby. He tried to keep his eyes open, but the lids seemed weighted. His head sagged and the fever took him again into the ebony darkness of some fantastic intergalactic night where weird shapes danced and whirled in hideous joyousness...

The rattling of the door-lock woke him. It might have been minutes later or days. Kieron had no way of knowing. He felt light-headed and giddy. He watched the door open with fever-bright eyes. A jailer carrying a flambeau entered and the light blinded Kieron. He shielded his face with his hand. There was a voice speaking to him. A voice he knew... and hated. With a shuddering effort, he took a grip on his staggering mind, his hate sustaining him now. Moving his hands away from his face, he looked up—into the icy eyes of Freka the Unknown.

"So you're awake at last," the Kalgan said.

Kieron made no reply. He could feel the fury burning deep inside him.

Freka held a jewelled dagger in his hands, toying with it idly. Kieron watched the shards of light leaping from the faceted gems in the liquid torchlight. The slender blade shimmered, blue and silvery in the Kalgan's hands.

"I have been told that the Lady Alys was with you—here on Kalgan. Is this true?"

Alys... Kieron thought vaguely of her for a moment, but somehow the picture brought sadness. He put her out of his mind and squinted up at Freka's gemmed dagger, unable to take his eyes from the glittering weapon.

"Can you speak?" demanded Freka. "Was Toran's sister with you?"

Kieron watched the weapon, a feral brilliance growing like a flame in his dark eyes.

Freka shrugged. "Very well, Kieron. It makes no difference. Does it interest you to know that the armies are gathering? Earth will be ours within four weeks." His voice was cold, unemotional. "You realize, of course, that you cannot be allowed to live."

Kieron said nothing. Very carefully he gathered his strength. The dagger... the dagger...

"I will not risk war with Valkyr by killing you now. But you will be tried by a council of star-kings on Earth when we have done what we must do..."

Kieron stared hard at the slender weapon, his hate pounding in his fevered mind. He drew a deep, shuddering breath. Freka spun the blade idly, setting the jewels afire.

"We should have taken you the moment Landor was missed," mused the Kalgan. "But... it really doesn't matter now..."

Kieron's taut muscles uncoiled in a snakelike, lashing movement. He hit Freka below the knees with all his fevered strength and the Kalgan went down without a sound, the slim dagger clattering on the slimy floor of the cell. The guard leaped forward. Kieron's searching hand closed about the hilt of the dagger. With a sound of pure animal rage in his throat he drove it into Freka's unprotected chest. Twice again his hand rose and fell, and then the guard caught him full in the face with a booted foot and the light of the torch faded again into inky blackness...

IN the darkness, time lost its meaning.

Kieron woke a dozen times, feeling the dull throbbing ache of his wounds and then fading again into unconsciousness. He ate—or was fed—enough to keep him alive, but he had no memory of it. He floated in a red-tinged sea of black, unreal, frightening. He screamed or sobbed as the phantasms of his sick dreams dictated, but through it all ran a single thread of elation. Freka, the hated one, was dead. No horror of nightmare or delirium could strip him of that one grip on life. Freka was dead. He remembered vaguely the feel of the dagger plunging again and again into his tormentor's breast. Sometimes he even forgot why he had hated Freka, but he clung to the knowledge that he had killed him the way a drowning man clings to the last suffocating breath.

Sounds filtered into Kieron's dungeon. Sounds that were familiar. The hissing roar of spaceships. Then later the awful susurrations of mob sounds. Kieron lay sprawled on the stones of his cell floor, not hearing, lost in the fantasmagoric stupor of delirium. His wounds still untended, only the magnificent body of a warrior helped him cling to the thread of life.

Other sounds came. The crash of rams and the clatter of falling masonry. The shrieks of men and women dying. The ringing cacophony of weapons and the curses of fighting men. Hours passed and the din grew louder, closer, in the heart of the Citadel of Neg itself. The torches on the outer cellblocks guttered out and were left untended. The sounds of fighting rose to a wild pitch, interlaced with the inhuman, animal sounds of a mob gone mad.

At last Kieron stirred, some of the familiar sounds of battle striking buried chords in his fevered mind. He listened to the advancing clash of weapons until it rang just beyond his dungeon door.

He dragged himself into his corner again and crouched there, the feral light in his eyes brilliant now. His hands itched for killing. He flexed the fingers painfully and waited.

The silence was sudden and as complete as the hush of the tomb.

Kieron waited.

The door was flung wide, and men bearing torches rushed into the cell. Kieron lunged savagely for the first one, hands seeking a throat.

"Kieron! Nevitta threw himself backward violently. Kieron clung to him, his face a fevered mask of hate. "Kieron! It is I . . . Nevitta!"

Kieron's hands fell away from the old warrior and he stood swaying, squinting against the light of the torches. "Nevitta . . . Nevitta?"

A wild laugh came from the prisoner's cracked lips. He looked about him, into the strained faces of his own fighting men.

He took one step and pitched forward into the arms of Nevitta, who carried him like a child up into the light, tears streaking his grizzled cheeks . . .

FOR three weeks Alys and Nevitta nursed

Kieron, sucking the poison of his untended wounds with their mouths and bathing him to break the fiery grip of the fever. At last they won. Kieron opened his eyes—and they were sane and clear.

"How long?" Kieron asked faintly.

"We were gone from Kalgan twenty days . . . you have lain here twenty-one," Alys said thankfully.

"Why did you come back here?" Kieron demanded bitterly. "You have lost an Empire!"

"We came for you, Kieron," Nevitta said. "For our king."

"But . . . Alys . . ." Kieron protested.

"I would not have the Great Throne, Kieron," said Alys, "if it meant leaving you to rot in a cell!"

Kieron turned his face to the wall. Because of him, the star-kings fought Ivane's battle. And by now they would have won. The only thing that had been done was the killing of the treacherous Freka. He held Kalgan now, for the Valkyrs had returned seeking their Warlord after Freka's plan had stripped the planet of fighting men—and the mobs had done the Valkyr's work for them. But two worlds were not an Empire of stars. Alys had been cheated. Because of him.

No! thought Kieron, by the Seven Hells, no! They could not be defeated so easily. There were five thousand warriors with him now. If need be, he would fight the Imperium's massed forces to win Alys' rightful place on the throne of Gilmer of Kaidor!

"Let me up," Kieron demanded. "If we hit them on Earth before they have a chance to consolidate, there's still a chance!"

"There is no hurry, Kieron," said Nevitta holding him in the bed with a great hand. "Freka and the star-kings have already . . ."

"Freka!" Kieron sat bolt upright.

"Why, yes . . ." murmured Nevitta in perplexity. "Freka."

"That's impossible!"

"We have had information from the Imperial City, Kieron. Freka is there," said Alys.

Kieron sank back on the pillows. Had he dreamed killing the Kalgan? No! It wasn't possible! He had driven the blade into his chest three times . . . driven it deep.

With an effort he rose from the bed. "Order my charger, Nevitta!"

"But sir!"

"Quickly, Nevitta! There is no time!" Nevitta saluted reluctantly and withdrew.

"Help me with my harness, Alys," ordered Kieron forgetful of majesty.

"Kieron, you can't ride!"

"I have to ride, Alys. Listen to me. I drove a dagger into Freka three times . . . and he has not died! One man can tell

us why, and we must know. *That man is Geller of the Marshes!*"

NEG was a shambles. The advent of the Valkyrs had been a signal for the brutish population to go mad. Mobs had thronged the streets, smashing, killing, and looting. The few Kalgan warriors left behind to guard the city had had to aid the Valkyrs in restoring order. It seemed to Kieron, as he rode along the now sullenly silent streets, that Kalgan and Neg had been deliberately abandoned as having served a purpose. If Freka still lived, as they said, then he was something unique among men, and not meant for so unimportant a world as Kalgan.

Shops and houses had been gutted by fire. Goods of all kinds were strewn about the streets, and here and there a body—twisted and dismembered—awaited the harrassed burial detachments that roamed the shattered megalopolis.

Kieron and Alys rode slowly toward the marshy slums of the lower city, Nevitta following them at a short distance. The three war horses, creatures bred to war and destruction, paced along easily, flaring nostrils taking in the familiar smells of a ruined city.

Along the street of the Black Flames there was nothing left standing whole. Every hovel, every tenement had been gutted and looted by the mobs. Presently, Kieron drew rein before a shuttered shanty between two structures of fire-blackened stone.

Nevitta rode up with a protest. "Why do you seek this beloved of demons, Kieron?" he asked fearfully. "No good can come of this!"

Kieron stared at the shanty. It stared back at him with veiled ghoulish eyes. The writhing mists shrouded the grey street in the eternal twilight of Kalgan. Kieron felt his hands trembling on the reins. This was the lair of the warlock.

The stench of the marshes was thick and now the mists turned to soft rain. Kieron dismounted.

"Wait for me here," he ordered Nevitta and Alys.

With pounding heart, he drew his sword and started for the door that gaped like the black mouth of a plague victim. Alys touched his elbow, disregarding his instructions. Her eyes were bright with fear, but she followed him closely. Secretly glad of

her companionship, Kieron breathed a prayer to his Valkyr gods and stepped inside . . .

The place was a wreck. Old books lay everywhere, ripped and tattered. In a corner, someone had tried to make a bonfire of a pile of manuscripts and broken furniture and had half succeeded.

"The mob has been here," Alys said succinctly.

Kieron led the way through the rubble toward the door of a back room. Carefully, he pushed it ajar with the point of his blade. It creaked menacingly, revealing another chamber—one filled with strange machines and twisted tubes of glass. Great black boxes stood along one wall, coils of bright wire running into the jumbled mass of shattered machines that dominated the center of the room. The air of the cold, silent room had a strange and unpleasant tang. The smell, thought the Valkyr, of the Great Destroyer!

The tip of his sword touched one of the bright copper coils springing from the row of black boxes along the wall, and a tiny blue spark leaped up the blade. Kieron yanked his weapon away, his heart racing wildly. A thin curl of smoke hung in the air, and the steel of the blade was pitted. Kieron fought down the urge to run in terror.

"I'm afraid, Kieron!" whispered Alys, clinging to him.

Kieron took her hand and moved cautiously around the pile of broken machinery. He found Geller then, and tried to stop Alys from seeing.

"The Great Destroyer he served failed him," Kieron said slowly.

The warlock was dead. The mob, terrified—and hating what they could not understand—had killed him cruelly. The staring eyes mocked Kieron, the blackened tongue lolled stupidly out of the dry lips. Geller's mystery, thought Kieron, was still safe with him. . . .

On the way out, Kieron stopped and picked up the remnants of a book of sigils. It was incredibly old, for the characters on the cover were those of the legendary First Empire. With some difficulty he made out the title.

"'Perpetually Regenerating Warps and their Application in Interstellar Engines'..."

The words meant nothing to him. He dropped the magic book and picked up two others. This time his eyes widened.

"What is it, Kieron?" Alys asked fearfully.

"Long ago," Kieron said thoughtfully, "on Valkyr, it was said that the ancients of the First Empire were familiar with the secrets of the Great Destroyer . . ."

"That's true. That is why the Interregnum came, and the dark ages," said Alys.

"I wonder," mused Kieron looking at the books. "What was this Geller known best for?"

Alys shuddered. "For his homunculi."

"The ancients, it is said, knew many things. Even how to make . . . artificial servants. Robots, they are called." He handed her the book. "Can you read this ancient script?"

Alys read aloud, her voice unsteady.

"*First Principles of Robotics.*"

"And this one?"

"*Incubation and Gestation of Androids* . . .!"

Kieron of Valkyr stood in the silent, wrecked laboratory of the dead warlock Geller, his medieval mind trying to break free of the bondage of a millennium of superstition and ignorance. He understood now . . . many things.

VI

LIKE great silver fish leaping up into the bowl of night, the ships of the Valkyr fleet rose from Kalgan. Within the pulsing hulls five thousand warriors rode, ready for battle. Against the mighty forces of the assembled star-kings, the army of Valkyr counted for almost nothing; but the savage fighting men of the Edge carried with them their talisman—Alys Imperatrix, uncrowned sovereign of the Galaxy, Heiress to the Thousand Emperors—the daughter of their beloved warrior-prince, Gilmer, conqueror of Kaidor.

In the lead vessel, Nevitta dogged the harried Navigators, urging greater speed. Below decks, the war chargers snorted and stomped the steel decks, sensing the tension of the coming clash in the close, smoky air of the spaceships.

Kieron stood beside the forward port with Alys, looking out into the strangely distorted night of space. As speed increased, the stars vanished and the night that pressed against the flanks of the hurtling ship grew grey and unsteady. Still

velocity climbed, and then beyond the great curving glass screen there was nothing. Not blackness, or emptiness. A soul-chilling nothingness that twisted the mind and refused to be accepted by human eyes. Hyperspace.

Kieron drew the draperies closed and the observation lounge of the huge ancient liner grew dim and warm.

"What's ahead, Kieron?" the girl asked with a sigh. "More fighting and killing?"

The Valkyr shook his head. "Your Imperium, Your Majesty," he said formally, "a crown of stars that a thousand generations have gathered for you. That lies ahead."

"Oh, Kieron! Can't you forget the Empire for the space of an hour?" Alys demanded angrily.

The Warlord of Valkyr looked at his Empress in perplexity. There were times when women were hard to fathom.

"Forget it, I say!" the girl cried, her eyes suddenly flaming.

"If Your Majesty wishes, I'll not speak of it again," said Kieron stiffly.

Alys took a step toward him. "There was a time when you looked at me as a woman. When you *thought* of me as a woman! Am I so different now?"

Kieron studied her slim body and sensuously patrician face. "There was a time when I thought of you as a child, too. Those times pass. You are now my Empress. I am your vassal. Command me. I'll fight for you. Die for you, if need be. Anything. But by the Seven Hells, Alys, don't torture me with favors I can't claim!"

"So I must command, then?" She stamped her foot angrily. "Very well, I command you, Valkyr!"

"Lady, I'll never be a Consort!"

The girl's face flushed. "Did I ask it? I know I can't make a lapdog out of you, Kieron."

"Stop it, Alys," Kieron muttered heavily.

"Kieron," she said softly, "I've loved you since I was a child. I love you now. Does that mean nothing to you?"

"Everything, Alys."

"Then for the space of this voyage, Kieron, forget the Empire. Forget everything except that I love you. Take what I offer you. There is no Empress here . . ."

THE silver fleet speared down into the atmosphere of the mother planet. Earth lay beneath them like a globe of azure. The spaceships fanned out into a wedge as they split the thin cold air high above the sprawling megalopolis of the Imperial City.

The capital lay ringed about with the somnolent shapes of the star-kings' great armada. Somewhere down there, Kieron knew, Freka waited. Freka the Unknown. The unkillable? Kieron wondered. For weapons he had his sword and a little knowledge. He prayed it would be enough. It had to be. Five thousand warriors could not defeat the assembled might of the star-kings.

Shunning the spaceport, Kieron led his fleet to a landing on the grassy esplanade that surrounded the city. As the hurried debarkation of men and horses began, Kieron could see a cavalry force massing before the gates to oppose them. He cursed and urged his men to greater speed. Horses reared and neighed; weapons glinted in the late afternoon sunlight.

Within the hour the debarkation was complete, and Kieron sat armed and mounted before the serried ranks of his warriors. The afternoon was filled with the flash of steel and the blazing glory of gonfalons as he ordered his ranks for battle . . . a battle that he hoped with all his heart to avoid.

Across the plain, the Valkyr could make out the pennon of Doorn in the first rank of the advancing defenders. Kieron ordered Nevitta to stay by the Empress in the rear ranks and to escort her forward with all ceremony if he called for her.

Alys rode a white charger and had clad herself in the panoply of a Valkyr warrior maid. Her hips were girded in a harness of linked steel plates, her long legs free to ride astride. Over her chest and breasts was laced a hauberk of chain mail that shimmered in the slanting sunlight. On her head a Valkyr's winged helmet—and from under it her golden hair fell in cascades of light to her shoulders. A silver cloak stood out behind her as she galloped past the ranks of Valkyrs, and they cheered her as she went. Kieron, watching her, thought she resembled the ancient war-goddess of his own world—impetuous, regal.

With a cry, Kieron ordered his riders forward and the glittering ranks swept forward across the esplanade like a tur-

bulent wave, spear-heads agleam, gonfalons fluttering. He rode far ahead, seeking a meeting with old Eric of Doorn, his father's friend.

He signalled, and the two surging masses of warriors slowed as the two star-kings rode to a meeting between the armies. Kieron raised an open right hand in the sign of truce and old Eric did likewise. Their caparisoned chargers tossed their heads angrily at being restrained and eyed each other with white-rimmed eyes.

Kieron drew rein, facing the old star-king.

"I greet you," he said formally.

"Do you come in friendship, or in war?" asked Eric.

"That will depend on the Empress," Kieron replied.

The lord of Doorn smiled, and there was scorn on his face. He was remembering Kalgan and Kieron's reluctance. "You will be pleased to know, then, that the Imperial Ivane bids you enter her city in peace—so that you may do her homage and throw yourself on her mercy for your crimes against Kalgan."

Kieron gave a short, steely laugh. So Ivane had already learned of the Valkyr sack of Kalgan. "I do not know any 'Imperial Ivane,' Eric," he said coldly. "When I spoke of the Empress, I meant the true Empress, Alys, the daughter of your lord and mine, Gilmer of Kaidor." He signalled Alys and Nevitta forward.

The gonfalons of the Valkyr line dipped in salute as Alys trotted through the ranks.

She drew rein, facing the amazed Eric.

"Noble lady!" he gasped. "We were told you were dead!"

"And so I might have been, had Ivane had her way!"

The old star-king stammered in confusion. There was more here than he could understand. Only a week before, he and the other star-kings had done homage to Ivane and hailed her as their savior from the oppressions of the Emperor Toran, and the nearest living kin to the late Gilmer. And now . . . !

Eric frowned. "If we have been made fools, Freka must answer for this!"

"And now," asked Kieron grimly, "do we enter the city in peace or do we cut our way in?"

Eric signalled his men to swing in beside the ranked Valkyrs and the whole mass of

armed men moved through the fading afternoon toward the gates of the Imperial City.

IT was dusk by the time the cavalcade reached the walls of the Imperial Palace. Kieron called a halt and ordered his men to rest on their arms. Taking only Nevitta and Alys with him, he joined Eric of Doorn in challenging the Janizaries of the Palace Guard.

They were passed by the stolid Pleiadenes without comment, for the lord of Doorn was known as a vassal of the Imperial Ivane. Faces set, the small party strode up the wide curving stairway that led into the Hall of the Great Throne. The courtiers had been warned by the shouts of the people in the streets that something was happening, and they had already begun to gather in the Throne Room.

He had come a long way, thought Kieron, from the day when he had stood before the Throne begging an audience with Toran. Now, everything hung on his one chance to prove his case—and Alys'—to the assembled nobles.

Kieron noted with some concern that the Palace Guards were gathering too. They covered each exit to the chamber, cutting off retreat.

By now, the Hall of the Great Throne was jammed with courtiers and star-kings, all tensely silent—waiting. Nor did they wait long.

With a blast of trumpets and a rolling of tympani, Ivane entered the Throne Room. Some of the courtiers knelt, but others stood in confusion, looking from Alys to Ivane and back again.

Kieron studied Ivane coldly. She was, he had to admit, a regal figure. A tall woman with hair the color of jet. A face that seemed chiseled out of marble. Dark, predatory eyes and a figure like a Dawn Age goddess. She stood before the Great Throne of the Empire, mantled in the sable robe of the Imperium—a robe as black as space and spangled with diamonds to resemble the stars of the Imperial Galaxy. On her head rested the irridium tiara of Imperatrix.

Ivane swept the Hall with a haughty stare that stung like a lash. When her eyes found Alys standing beside Kieron, they brightened, became ferid.

"Guards!" she commanded. "Seize that woman! She is the Killer of the Emperor Toran!"

A murmuring filled the chamber. The Janizaries pressed forward. Kieron drew his sword and leaped to the dais beside Ivane. She did not shrink back from him.

"Touch her, and Ivane dies!" shouted Kieron, his point at Ivane's naked breast.

The murmuring subsided and the Janizaries pulled up short.

"Now, you are all going to listen to me!" shouted Kieron from the dais. "This woman under my blade is a murderer and plotter, and I can prove it!"

Ivane's face was strained and white. Not from fear of his sword, Kieron knew.

"In the Palace dungeons you will likely find Landor . . ." Kieron continued. "He will be there because he knew of Ivane's plottings and talked too much when he had a dagger at his throat. He will confirm what I say!"

"This woman plotted to usurp the Imperium as long as five years ago! It may have been longer . . ." He turned to Ivane. "How long does it take to incubate an android, Ivane? A year? Two? And then to train him, school him so that every move he makes is intended to further your aims? How long does all that take?"

Ivane uttered a scream of terror now. "Freka! Call Freka!"

Kieron dropped his sword point and stepped away from Ivane as though she were contaminated. There was little danger from her now—but there was still another.

Freka appeared at the edge of the dais, his tall form towering above the courtiers. "You called for me, Imperial Ivane?"

Ivane stared at Kieron with hate-filled eyes. "You have failed me! Kill him now!"

KIERON whirled and caught Freka's blade on his own. The courtiers drew back, giving them room to fight. No one made a move to interfere. It was known that Valkyrs had sacked the city of Neg, and according to the warrior code the two warlords must be allowed to fight to the death if they wished.

Kieron made no attack. Instead he retreated before the expressionless Freka.

"Did you know, Freka," asked Kieron softly, that Geller of the Marshes is dead? He was your father in a way, wasn't he?"

Freka made no reply, and for a moment

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the only sound in the hushed chamber was the ring of blades.

Suddenly Kieron lunged. His sword pierced Freka from breast to back. The Valkyr stepped back and pulled his blade clear. The crowd gasped, for Freka the Unknown did not fall . . .

"Are you really unkillable?" breathed Kieron. "I wonder!"

Again he lunged under the mechanical guard of the Kalgan. Again his blade sank deep. Freka backed away for a moment, still alert and unwounded.

Kieron shouted derisively at the star-kings: "Great warriors! Do you see? You have followed the leadership of an android! A homunculus spawned by the warlock Geller!"

A gasping roar went up in the chamber. A sound of superstitious horror and growing anger.

Kieron parried a thrust and brought his blade down on Freka's sword arm. Hard. A sword clattered to the flagstones—still gripped by a slowly relaxing hand. There was no blood. The android still moved in, eyes expressionless, his one hand reaching for his enemy. Kieron struck again. A clean cut opened from shoulder to belly, slicing the artificial tendons and leaving the android helpless but still erect. Kieron raised and lowered his blade in glittering arcs. Freka . . . or the thing that had been Freka . . . collapsed in a grotesque heap. Still it moved. Kieron passed his point again and again through the quivering mass until at long last it was still. Somewhere a woman fainted.

A thick silence fell over the assemblage. All eyes turned to Ivane. She stood staring at the remnants of the thing that had been . . . almost . . . a man. Her hand fluttered at her throat.

Alys' voice cut through the heavy stillness. "Arrest that woman for the murder of my brother Toran!"

But the crowd of courtiers was thinking of other things. Jaded and cynical, they had seen with their own eyes that Ivane was a familiar of the dreaded Great Destroyer. Someone cried: "Witch! Burn her!"

The mass of courtiers and warriors swept forward, screaming for the kill. Kieron leaped for the dais, his sword still bared.

"I'll kill the first one who sets foot on the Great Throne!" he cried.

But Ivane had heard the crowd sounds.

The black mantle slipped from her shoulders, and she stood stripped to the waist, like a marble goddess—her eyes recapturing some of their icy hauteur. Then, before she could be stopped, she had taken a jewelled dagger and driven it deep into her breast.

Kieron caught her as she fell, feeling the warm blood staining his hands. He eased her down on the foot of the Great Throne and laid his ear to her breast.

There was no pulse. Ivane was dead.

BEFORE the assembled Court, the Warlord of Valkyr knelt before his Empress. The star-kings had gone, and the Valkyrs were the last outworld warriors remaining in the Imperial City. Now, they too, would take their leave.

The Empress sat on the Great Throne, mantled in sable. Somehow, the huge throne and the vast vaulted chamber seemed to make her look small and frail.

"Your Imperial Majesty," said Kieron, "have we your leave to go?"

Alys' eyes were bright with tears. She leaned forward so that none but Kieron might hear. "Stay a while yet, Kieron. At least let us say our goodbyes alone and not . . ." She looked about the crowded Throne Room, ". . . not here."

Kieron shook his head mutely. Aloud, he said again, "Have I Your Majesty's permission to return to Valkyr?"

"Kieron . . . !" whispered Alys. "Please . . ."

He looked up at her once, pain in his eyes, but he did not speak.

Alys knew then that the gulf had opened between them again; that this time, it was for the rest of their lives. The tears came and streaked her cheek as she lifted her head and spoke for all the Court to hear.

"Permission is granted, My Lord of Valkyr. You . . . you may return to Valkyr." And then she whispered, "And my love goes with you, Kieron!"

Kieron raised her jewelled hands to his lips and kissed them . . . Then he arose and turned on his heel to stride swiftly from the Great Hall.



His blaster raved, and Alonzo had no time to scream before the flame licked about him . . .

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

STAR SHIP

by POUL ANDERSON

I

WITH sunset, there was rain. When Dougald Anson brought his boat in to Krakenau harbor, there was only a vast wet darkness around him.

He swore in a sulfurous mixture of Krakenai, Volgazani, and half a dozen other languages, including some space-

man's Terrestrial, and let down the sail. The canvas was heavy and awkward in the drenching rain; it was all he could do to lash it around the boom. Then he picked up the long wooden sweep and began sculling his boat in toward the dock.

Lightning flared bluely through the rain, and he saw the great bay in one livid flash, filled with galleys at anchor and the little schooners of the fishing fleet. Beyond the wharfs, the land climbed steeply toward the sky, and he saw the dark mass of the town reaching up to the citadel on the hilltop. Dark—dark! Hardly a light showed in the gloom.

What in the name of Shantuzik was up? The waterfront, at least, should have been alive with torches and music and bawdy merriment. And the newly installed street lights should have been twinkling along the main avenues leading up to the castle. Instead Krakenau lay crouched in night, and—

He scowled, and drove the light vessel shoreward with rhythmic sweeps of the long oar. Uneasiness prickled along his spine. It wasn't right. He'd only been gone a few days. What had happened in the meantime?

When he reached the pier, he made fast with a quietness unusual to him. Maybe he was being overcautious. Maybe it was only that the king had died or some other reason for restrained conduct had arisen. But a man didn't spend years warring among the pirates of the outer islands and the neighbouring kingdoms around Krakenau without learning to be careful.

He ducked under the awning in the bows which was the boat's only shelter, and got a towel from the sea chest and rubbed his rain-wet body dry. He'd only been wearing a tattered pair of breeches, and the water ran along his ribs and down his flanks. Then he shrugged on a tunic, and a coat of ring-mail over that. A flat-bladed sword at his side and a helmet over his long yellow hair completed his outfit. He felt secure now, and jumped up to the pier.

For a moment he stood in thought. The steady rain washed down over his leather cape, blurring vision a few meters away, and only the intermittent flicket of lightning broke the darkness. Where to go? His father's house was the logical place, perhaps. But the Masefield dwelling was a little closer to here, and Ellen—

He grinned and set out at a long stride. Masefield's be it.

The street onto which he turned opened before him like a tunnel of night. The high steep-roofed houses lay dark on either side, walling it in, and the fluoroglobes were unlit. When the lightning blinked, the wet cobblestones gleamed; otherwise there was only darkness and rain.

He passed one of the twisting alleys, and glanced at it with automatic caution. The next instant he had thrown himself to the ground, and the javelin whipped through the place where his belly had been.

He rolled over and bounded to his feet, crouched low, the sword whining out of its scabbard into his hand. Four Khazaki sprang from the alley and darted at him.

Dougald Anson grunted, backed up against a wall. The natives were armed and mailed, they were warriors, and they had all the unhuman swiftness of their species. Four of them——!

The leading attacker met his sword in a clang of steel. Dougald let him come lunging in, took the cut on his mailed ribs, and swept his own weapon murderously out. Faster than a man could think, the Khazaki had his own blade up to parry the sweeping blow. But he wasn't quite fast enough; he met it at an awkward angle and the Terrestrial's sheer power sent the sword spinning from his hand. The hand went too, a fractional second later, and he screamed and fell back and away.

The others were upon Anson. For moments it was parry and slash, three against one, with no time to feel afraid or notice the cuts in his arms and legs. A remote part of his brain told him bleakly: *This is all. You're finished. No lone Earthling ever stood up to more than two Khazaki.* But he stood up long to more than two Khazaki. But he hardly noticed.

Suddenly there were only two in front of him. He darted forth from the wall, his sword crashing down with all the power of his huge body behind it. The warrior tried to skip aside—too late. The tremendous blow smashed his own parry down and sang in his skullbones.

And the last of the attackers died. He tumbled over beside the second, and each of them had a feathered shaft between his ribs.

The bowman came loping through the

rain. He paused, in typical Khazak fashion, to slit the throat of the wounded being, and then came up to where Dougald Anson stood panting.

The human strained through the rainy dark. Lightning glimmered in the sky, and he recognized the newcomer. "Janazik!"

"And Anson," nodded the Khazaki. His sharp white teeth gleamed in his shadowed face. "You seem to have met a warm welcome."

"Too warm. But—thanks!" Anson bent over the nearest of the corpses, and only now did the realization penetrate his brain. They all wore black mail of a certain pattern, spiked helmets, red cloaks—Gods of Gorzak! They were all royal guardsmen!

HE looked up to the dark form of Janazik, and his lean face was suddenly tight. "What is this?" he asked slowly. "I thought maybe bandits or some enemy state had managed to enter the city——"

"That would be hard to do, now that we have the guns," said Janazik. "No, these are within our own walls. It you'll look closely, you'll see they wear a gold-colored brassard."

"Prince Volakech—but he——"

"There's more to this than Volakech, and more than a question of the throne," said Janazik. Then suddenly, urgently: "But we can't stay here to talk. They're patrolling the streets, it's dangerous to be abroad. Let's get to shelter."

"What's happened?" Anson got up, towering over the native by a good quarter meter, his voice suddenly rough. "What happened? How is everyone?"

"Not well. Come on, now."

"Ellen? Masefield Ellen?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. Now come on!"

They slipped into the alley. Anson was blind in the gloom, and Janazik's slim six-fingered hand took his to guide him. The Khazaki were smaller than Terrestrials and lacked the sheer strength and endurance which Earth's higher gravity gave; but they could move like the wind, they had an utter grace and balance beside which humans were clumsy cattle, and they saw in the dark.

Dougald Anson's mind whirled in des-

perate speculation. If Volakech had gotten enough guardsmen and soldiers on his side to swing a palace revolution, it was bad. But matters looked worse than that. Why should Volakech's men have assaulted a human? Why should Janazik have to sneak him into a hiding place? How had the revolutionists gotten control in the first place, against King Aligan's new weapons? What powers did they have now?

What had become of the human community in Krakenau? What of his father, his brothers and sisters, his friends? What of Masefield Ellen? What of Ellen?

He grew aware that Janazik had halted. They were in an evil-smelling, refuse-littered courtyard, surrounded by tumble-down structures, dark and silent as the rest of the city. Anson realized that all Krakenau was blacked out. In such times of danger, the old Khazaki clandom reasserted itself. Families barricaded themselves in their dwellings, prepared to fight all comers till the danger was past. The city was awake, yes—it was crouched in breathless tension all around him—but not a light showed, not a hand stirred, not a voice spoke. They were all waiting.

Janazik crouched at the base of one of the old buildings and lifted a trapdoor. Light gleamed dimly up from a cellar. He dropped lightly down and Anson followed, closing the door behind him.

There was only one smoky lamp in the dank gloom. Shadows were thick and huge around the guttering wick. The red flame picked out faces, shimmered off cold steel, and lost itself in darkness.

Anson's eyes scanned the faces. Half a dozen humans: Chiang Chung-Chen, Du-Frere Marie, Gonzales Alonzo and his wife Nora who was Anson's sister, Dougald Joan, Masefield Philip—No sign of Ellen.

"Anse! Anse!" The voices almost sobbed out of the dim-lit hollowness. Joan and Nora sprang forward as if to touch their brother, make sure he was alive and no vision of the night, but Janazik waved them back with his sword.

"No noise," hissed the Khazaki's fierce whisper. "No noise, by all the thirteen hells! Volakech's *busrats* are all over the city. If a patrol finds us——"

"Ellen!" Anson's blue eyes searched for Masefield Philip, crouched near the lamp. "Where's your sister, Phil?"

"I don't know," whispered the boy. "We're all who seem to've escaped. They may have caught her—I don't know——"

"Father." Joan's voice caught with a dry sob. "Anse, Father and Jamie are dead. The rebels killed them."

For a moment, Anson couldn't grasp the reality of that. It just wasn't possible that his big laughing father and young Jamie—the brat should be killed—*no!*

But——

He looked up, and then looked away. When he turned back to face them, his visage had gone hard and expressionless, and only the white-knuckled grip on his sword showed he was not a stranger.

"All right," he said slowly, very slowly and steadily. "All right. Give me the story. What is it? What's happened in Krakenau?"

II

JANAZIK padded around to stand before him. He was not the only Khazaki in the cellar; there were a good dozen others. Mostly they were young males, and Anse recognized them. Bolazan, Pragakech, Slavatozik—he'd played with them as a child, he'd fared out with them as a youth and a man to the wars, to storm the high citadel of Zarganau and smite the warriors of Volgazan and pirate the commerce of the outer islands. They were good comrades, yes. But Father and Jamie were dead. Ellen, Ellen was vanished. Only a fragment of the human community remained; his world had suddenly come down in ruin about him.

Well—his old bleak resolution came back to him, and he met the yellow slit-pupilled gaze of Janazik with a challenging stare.

They were a strange contrast, these two, for all that they had fought shoulder to shoulder halfway round the planet, had sung and played and roistered from Krakenau to Gorgazan. Comrades in arms, blood brothers maybe, but neither was human from the viewpoint of the other.

Dougald Anson was big even for a Terrestrial; his tawny head rode at full two meters and his wide shoulders strained the chain mail he wore. He was young, but his face had had the youth burned out of it by strange suns and wild winds around the world, was lean and brown and marked with an old scar across the forehead. His

eyes were almost intolerably bright and direct in their blue stare, the eyes of a bird of prey.

The Khazaki was humanoid, to be sure—shorter than the Terrestrial average, but slim and lithe. Soft golden fur covered his sinewy body, and a slender tail switched restlessly against his legs. His head was the least human part of him, with its sloping forehead, narrow chin, and blunt-muzzled face. The long whiskers around his mouth and above the amber cat-eyes twitched continuously, sensitive to minute shifts in air currents and temperature. Along the top of his skull, the fur grew up in a cockatoo plume that swept back down his neck, a secondary sexual characteristic that females lacked.

Janazik was something of a dandy, and even now he wore the baggy silk-like trousers, long red sash, and elaborately embroidered blouse and vest of a Krakenau noble. It was woefully muddy, but he managed to retain an air of fastidious elegance. The bow and quiver across his back, the sword and dirk at his side, somehow looked purely ornamental when he wore them.

He was almost dwarfed by Anses' huge-thewed height. But old Chiang Chung-Chen noticed, not for the first time, that the human wore clothing and carried weapons of Khazaki pattern, and that the harsh syllables of Krakenau came more easily to his lips than the Terrestrial of his fathers. And the old man nodded, gravely and a little wearily.

Janazik spoke rapidly: "Volakech must have been plotting his return from exile a long time. He managed to raise a small army of pirates, mercenaries, and outlawed Krakenau, and he made bargains with groups within the city. Two days ago, certain of the guards seized the new guns and let Volakech and his men in. Others revolted within the town. I think King Aligan was killed; at least I've seen or heard nothing of him since. There's been some fighting between rebels and loyalists but the rebels got all the Earth-weapons when they captured the royal arsenal and since then they've just about crushed resistance. Loyalists who could, fled the city. The rest are in hiding. Volakech is king."

"But—why us? The Terrestrials—what have we to do with——"

Janazik's yellow eyes blazed at him. "You aren't stupid, blood-brother. Think!"

After a moment Anse nodded bleakly.

"*The Star Ship*—"

"Of course! Volakech has seized the rocket boat. No Terrestrial in his right mind would show him how to use it, so he had to capture someone who understood its operation and force them to take him out to the Star Ship. Old Masefield Henry was killed resisting arrest—you know how bloody guardsmen are, in spite of orders to take someone alive. Volakech ordered the arrest of all Terrestrials then. A few surrendered to him, a few were killed resisting, most were captured by force. As far as we know, this group is all which escaped."

"Then Ellen—?"

"That's the weird thing. I don't believe she has been caught. Volakech's men are still scouring the city for 'an Earthling woman' as the orders read. And who could it be but Ellen? No other woman represents any danger or any desirable capture to Volakech."

"Ellen understands astrogation," said Anse slowly. "She learned it from her grandfather."

"Yes. And now that he is dead, she is the only human—the only being on this planet—who can get that rocket up to the Star Ship. And Masefield Carson knows it."

"Carson? Ellen's older brother? What—"

Janazik's voice was cold as Winter: "Masefield Carson was with Volakech. He led the rebels inside the city. Now he's the new king's lieutenant."

"Carson! No!"

"Carson—yes!" Janazik's smile was without mirth or pity. His eyes sought out Philip, huddled miserably beside the lamp. "Isn't that the truth?"

THE boy nodded, too choked with his own unhappiness to cry. "Carse always was a friend of Volakech, before King Aligan outlawed him," he mumbled. "And he always said how it was a shame, and how Volakech would know better what to do with the Star Ship than anyone now. Then—that night—" His voice trailed off, he sat dumbly staring into the flame.

"Carson led the rebel guardsmen in their seizure of the city guns," said Janazik. "He also rode to the Masefield house at the

head of a troop of them and called on his people to surrender on promise of good treatment. Joe and the mother did, and I suppose they're held somewhere in the citadel now. Phil and Ellen happened to be out at the time. When Phil heard of the uprising, he was afraid to give himself up, in spite of the heralds that went about promising safety to those who did. He heard how the rebels had been killing his friends. He went to Slavatozik here, whom he could trust, and later they got in touch with me. I'd used this hiding place before, and gathered all the fugitives I could find here." Janazik shrugged, a sinuous unhuman gesture. "Since then I've seen Carse, at a distance, riding around like a prince of the blood, with a troop of his own personal guardsmen. I suspect he really runs things now. Volakech wants power, but only Carse can show him how to get it."

"And Ellen—?"

"No sign of her. But as I said, I think she's in hiding somewhere, or the guards wouldn't be out looking for a woman. She wouldn't give herself up."

"Not Ellen." A grim pride lifted Anse's head.

"Remains the problem of finding her before they do," said Gonzales Alonzo. "If they catch her and make her plot an orbit for the rocket, they'll have the Star Ship—which means power over the whole planet."

"Not that I care who's king," growled Pragakech. "But you know that Masefield Carson never did want to use the ship to get out to the stars. And I want to see those other worlds before I die."

"To the thirteenth hell with the other worlds," snarled Bolazan. "Aligan was my king, and it's for me to avenge him and put his rightful heir on the throne."

"We all have our motives for wanting the blood of Volakech and Carson," said Janazik. "Never mind that now; the important thing is how to get at their lives. We're few, Anse. Here are all the free humans we know of, except Masefield Ellen. There can't be more than two or three at large, and perhaps ten dead. That means the enemy holds almost a hundred humans captive. Discounting children and others who are ignorant of Terrestrial science, it still means they'll be able to operate the guns, the steel mill, the atomic-powerplant—all the new machines except the rocket boat, and they only need Ellen for that."

Anse nodded, slowly. "What is our strength?" he asked.

"I don't know. Not much. I know where about a hundred Khazaki warriors are hiding, ready to follow us whenever we call on them, and there will be many more sitting at home now who'll rise if someone else take the lead. But the enemy has all the guns. It would be suicide."

"What about the Khazaki who fled?" Usually, in one of the planet's violent changes of governments, the refugees were powerful nobles who would be slain as a safety measure if they stayed at home but who could, in exile, raise strong forces for a comeback. Such a one had Volakech himself, barely escaping with his life after his disastrous attempt to seize the throne a few years back.

"Don't be more stupid than you can help," snorted Janazik. "By the time they can have rallied enough to do any good, Volakech and Carson will have the Star Ship, one way or another, and then the whole world is at their mercy."

"That means we have to strike back somehow—quickly!" Anse stood for a moment in thought.

The habits of his warring, wandering years were coming back to him. He had faced death and despair before, and with strength and cunning and bluff and sheer luck had come through alive. This was another problem, more desperate and more urgent, but still another problem.

No—there was more to it than that.

HIS face grew bleak, and it was as if a coldness touched his heart. Carson was Ellen's older brother, and even if they had quarreled from time to time he knew she had always felt deeply bound to him.

Carse is everything I never was. He stayed in Krakenau and studied and became an educated man and a skilled engineer while I went hallooing over the world. He's brave and a good fighter—so am I—but he's so much more than that. I imagine it was his example that made Ellen learn the astrology only her grandfather knew.

And now I'm back from roaming and roving with Janazik, and I'm trying hard to settle down and learn something so that I won't be just a barbarian, a wild Khazaki in human skin, when we go out to the civilization of the stars. So that I won't be too utterly ashamed to ask Ellen to marry me.

And it was all going pretty well until now. But now—I'm fighting her brother—

Well—he pushed the thought out of his brain. After all, apparently she was in opposition to Carse's plans too.

"I wonder why they tried to kill me?" he asked aloud, more to fill in the time while he thought than out of curiosity.

"You'd be of no use to Carson, having no technical education," said Janazik, "while your knowledge of fighting and your connections with warlike groups make you dangerous to him. Also, I don't think he ever liked your paying attention to Ellen."

"No—he always said I was a waster. Called me a—an absorbed Khazaki. I'd've split his skull if he hadn't been Ellen's brother—No matter now. We've more important things to talk over."

Have we, now? he thought sickly. Carson must know Ellen well, better than I do. If he thinks he can have me killed without making her hate him, then—maybe I never had any chance with her then—

"How'd you happen by?" he asked tonelessly.

"I've been out from time to time, looking for Ellen and killing guardsmen whenever I could catch them alone." Janazik's white fangs gleamed in a carnivore's smile. "And, of course, I expected you back from your fishing trip about this time, and watched for you lest you blunder into their hands."

Anse began to pace the floor, back and forth, his head bent to avoid the basement rafters. If Carson was in control, and out to kill him . . . There was more to it than that, of course. The whole future of the planet Khazak, perhaps of the fabulous Galactic civilization itself, was balanced on the edge of a sword. If Volakech or a descendant of his took the warlike race out among the stars, with a high level of industry to back a scheme of conquest—

But it didn't matter. All the univers didn't matter. There was only Ellen, and his own dead kin, and himself.

A man's heart can only hold so much.

Janazik stood quietly back, watching his friend's restless prowling. He had seen that pacing before, and he knew that some scheme would come out of it, crazy and reckless and desperate, with his own cool unhuman intelligence to temper it and make it workable. He and Anse made a

good team. They made the best damned fighting team Khazak had ever seen.

Presently the human lifted his head. There was silence in the hiding place, thick and taut, so that they could hear their own breathing and the steady drum of rain on the trapdoor.

"I have an idea," said Anse.

III

THE long night wore on. Janazik had sent most of his Khazaki out to alert the other loyalists in their hiding places, but only they had a chance of slipping unobserved past the enemy patrols. Humans, obviously alien, slow-footed and clumsy beside the fitting shadows of Khazak, would never get far. They had to wait.

Anse was glad of the opportunity for conference with Janazik, planning the assault on the citadel. Neither of them was very familiar with the layout, but Alonzo, as an engineer on the rocket building project, and old Chiang had been there often enough to know it intimately.

It was impossible that a few hundred warriors armed with the primitive weapons of Khazak could take the stronghold. Its walls were manned by more fighters than that, and there were the terrible Earth-type guns as well. Alonzo had a blaster with a couple of charges, but otherwise there was nothing modern in the loyalist force.

But still that futile assault was necessary—

"It's taking a desperate chance," said Dougald Joan. She was young yet, hardly out of girlhood, but her voice had an indomitable ring. The true warriors among the five Earthling families were all Dougalds thought Janazik. "Suppose Ellen doesn't come out of hiding? Suppose she's dead or—or captured already, in spite of what we think."

"We'll just have to try and destroy the rocket then," said Alonzo. "Certainly we can't let Volakech get to the Star Ship." He sighed heavily. "And the labor of another generation will be gone."

"It wouldn't take us long to build another boat," said his wife. "We know how, now, and we have the industry to do it."

"There are only a few who really know how to handle and build the Terrestrial machines, and most of them are in the enemy's hands," reminded old Chiang

"I'm sure I couldn't tell you much about atomic engines, even though I was on the Star Ship herself once. If those few are killed, we may never be able to duplicate our efforts. What Terrestrials survive will sink back into barbarism, become simply another part of Khazaki culture."

"I don't know—" said Nora.

"I know, because I've seen it happen," insisted Chiang. "In the fifty years since we were marooned here, two generations have been born on Khazak. They've grown up among Khazaki, played with native children, worked and fought with Khazaki natives, adopted the dress and speech and whole outlook of Krakenau. Only a few in this third generation have consciously tried to remain—Terrestrial. I must admit that Masfeld Carson is one such. Ellen is another. But few others."

"Would you have us wall ourselves out from the world?" asked Anse with a bridling anger.

"No. I don't see how the situation could be helped. We are a minority in an alien culture with which we've had to cooperate. It's only natural that we'd be more assimilated than assimilating. Even at that, we've wrought immense changes."

JANAZIK nodded. The stranded Terrestrials had found themselves in an early Iron Age civilization of city-states, among a race naturally violent and predatory. For their own survival, they had had to league forces with the state in which they found themselves—Krakenau, as it happened. Before they could build the industry they needed, they had to have some security—which meant that they must teach the Krakenau military principles and means of making new weapons which would make them superior to their neighbors. After that—well, it took an immense technology to build even a small spaceship. The superalloys which could stand the combustion of rocket fuel required unheard-of elements such as manganese and chromium, which required means of mining and refining them, which required a considerable chemical plant, which required—How far down do you have to start? And there were a hundred or a thousand other requirements of equal importance and difficulty.

Besides, the Terrestrials had had to learn much from scratch themselves. None of them had ever built a rocketship, had

ever seen one in action even. It was centuries obsolete in Galactic civilization. But gravity drives were out of the question. So—they'd had to design the ship from the ground up. Which meant years of painstaking research . . . and only a few interested humans and Khazaki to do it. The rest were too busy with their own affairs in the brawling barbaric culture.

Ten years ago, the first spaceboat had blasted off toward the Star Ship—and exploded in mid-acceleration. More designing, more testing, more slow building—and now the second one lay ready. Perhaps it could reach the Star Ship.

The Star Ship—faster than light, weightless when it chose to be for all its enormous mass, armed with atomic guns that could blast a city to superheated vapor. Whoever controlled that ship could get to Galactic stars in a matter of weeks. Or could rule all Khazaki if he chose.

No wonder Carson and Volakech had struck now, before the rocket boat was launched. When *they* had the ship—

But only Ellen knew the figures of its orbit and the complicated calculations by which the boat would plot a course to get there. A bold warrior might make a try at reaching the ship by the seat-of-the-pants piloting, but he wouldn't have much chance of making it. So Ellen, and the rocket boat, were the fulcrum of the future.

"Strange," mused Chiang. "Strange that we should have had that accident . . ."

They had heard the story a hundred times before, but they gathered around to listen; there was nothing else to do while the slow hours dragged on.

"We were ten, all told, five men and their wives. Exploratory expeditions are often out for years at a time, so the Service makes it a policy to man the ships with married couples. It's hard for a Khazaki to appreciate the absolute equality between the sexes which human civilization has achieved. It's due to the advanced technology, of course, and we're losing it as we go back to barbarism—"

Anse felt a small hand laid on his arm. He looked down into the dark eyes of Du-Frere Marie. She was a pretty girl, a little younger than he, and until he'd really noticed Ellen he'd been paying her some attention.

"I don't care about equality," she whispered. "A woman shouldn't try to be a

man. I'd want only to cook and keep house for my man, and bear his children."

It was, Anse realized, a typical Khazaki attitude. But—he remembered with a sudden pity that Carson had been courting Marie. "This is pretty tough on you," he muttered. "I'll try to see that Carse is saved . . . If we win," he added wryly.

"Him? I don't care about that Masefield. Let them hang him. But Anse—be careful—"

HE looked away, his face hot in the gloom, realizing suddenly why Masefield Carson hated him. Briefly, he wished he hadn't had such consistent luck with women. But the accident that there was a preponderance of females in the second and third generations of Khazaki humans had made it more or less inevitable, and he—well, he was only human. There'd been Earthling girls; and not a few Khazaki women had been intrigued by the big Terrestrial. Yes, *I was lucky*, he thought bitterly. *Lucky in all except the one that mattered.*

"—we'd been a few weeks out of Avandar—it was an obscure outpost then, though I imagine it's grown since—when we detected this Sol-type sun. Seeing that there was an Earth-like planet, we decided to investigate. And since we were all tired of being cooped in the ship, and telescopes showed that any natives which might exist would be too primitive to endanger us, we all went down in the lifeboat.

"And the one-in-a-billion chance happened . . . the atomic converters went out of control and we barely escaped from the boat before it was utterly consumed. We were stranded on an alien planet, with nothing but our clothes and a few hand weapons—and with our ship that would go faster than light circling in its orbit not ten thousand kilometers above us!

"No chance of rescue. There are just too many suns for the Galactic Coordinators to hope to find a ship that doesn't come back. Expansion into this region of space wasn't scheduled for another two centuries. So there we were, and until we could build a boat which would take us back to our ship—there we stayed!

"And it's taken us fifty years so far . . ."

Pragakech came in with the rain glistening on his fur and running in small puddles about his padding feet. "We're ready," he said. "Every warrior whose

niding place we knew has been contacted."

"Then we might as well go," Janazik got up and stretched luxuriously. His eyes were like molten gold in the murky light.

"So soon?" Marie held Anse back with anxious hands. "This same night?"

"The sooner the better," Anse said grimly. "Every day that goes by, more of our friends will be found out and killed, more places will be searched for Ellen, Volakech's grip on the city will grow stronger." He put the spiked helmet back on his head, and buckled the sword about his mailed waist. "Come on, Janazik. The rest stay here and wait for word. If we're utterly defeated, such of us as survive will manage to get back and lead you out of Krakenau—somehow."

Marie started to say something, then shook her head as if the words hurt her throat and drew Anse's face down to hers. "Goodbye, then," she whispered. "Goodbye, and the gods be with you."

He kissed her more awkwardly than was his wont, feeling himself a thorough scoundrel. Then he followed Pragakech and Janazik out the trapdoor.

IV

THE courtyard was filled with Khazaki warriors, standing silently in the slow heavy rain. It was the darkness of early morning, and only an occasional wan lightning flash, gleaming on spears and axes, broke the chill gloom. Anse was aware of softly-moving supple bodies pressing around him, of night-seeing eyes watching him with an impassive stare. It was he and Janazik who had the plan, and who had the most experience in warfare, and the rest looked to them for leadership. It was not easy to stand under that cool, judging scrutiny, and Anse strode forth into the street with a feeling of relief at the prospect of action.

As they moved toward the castle, along the narrow cobbled lanes winding up the hills, their army grew. Warriors came loping from alleys, came slipping out of the dark barricaded houses, seemed to rise out of the rainy night around them. All Krakenau was abroad, it seemed, but quietly, quietly.

And throughout the town other such forces were on the move, gathering under the lead of anyone who could be trusted,

converging on the citadel and the rocket-ship it guarded.

Tonight—victory, or destruction of the boat and a drawn battle... or repulsion and ultimate shattering defeat. The gods are abroad tonight.

Somewhere, faint and far through the dull washing of rain, a trumpet blew a harsh challenge, once and again. After it came a distance-muted shouting of voices and a clattering of swords.

"One of our bands has come across a patrol," said Janazik unnecessarily. "Now all hell will be loose in Krakenau. Come on!"

They broke into a trot up the hill. Rounding a sharp turn in the street, they saw a close-ranked mass of warriors with spears aloft.

Guardsmen!

The two forces let out a simultaneous yell and charged at each other in the disorderly Khazaki fashion. It was beginning to lighten just a little; Anse could make out enough for purposes of battle. Hai-ah—here we go!

He smashed into a leading guard, who stabbed at him with his long pike. The edge grazed off Anse's heavy chain mail as the Earthling chopped out with his sword. He knocked the shaft aside and thrust in, hewing at the Khazaki's neck. The guard intercepted the blow with his shield, and suddenly rammed it forward. The murderous spike on its boss thudded against the Terrestrial's broad chest and the linked rings gave under that blow—just a little, just enough to draw blood. Anse roared and chopped down across the other's right arm. The Khazaki howled his pain and stumbled back.

Another was on the Earthling like a spitting cat. Swords hummed and clashed together. Leaping and dodging, the Khazaki lashed out with a blade like a flickering flame, and none of Anse's blows could land on him.

The Khazaki leaped in suddenly, his edge reaching for the human's unprotected throat. Anse parried with his sword, while his left fist shot out like an iron cannonball. It hit the native full in the face, with a crunch of splintering bones. The guard's head snapped back and he fell to the blood-running street.

Janazik was fighting two at once, his sword never resting. He leaped and danced

like the shadow of a flame in the wind, and he was laughing—laughing! Anse hewed out, and one of the foemen's heads sprang from its neck. Janazik darted in, there was a blur of steel, and the other guardsman toppled.

Axe and sword! Spear and dagger and flying arrows! The fight rolled back and forth between the darkling walls of houses. It grew with time; Volakech's patrols were drawn by the noise, loyalists crouched in hiding heard of the attack and sped to join it. Anse and Janazik fought side by side, human brawn and Khazaki swiftness, and the corpses were heaped where they went.

A pike raked Anse's hand. He dropped his sword and the enemy leaped in with drawn knife. Anse did not reach for his own dirk—no human had a chance in a knife fight with a Khazaki—but his arms snaked out, his hands closed on the native's waist, and he lifted the enemy up and hurled him against another. They both went down in a crash of denting armor and snapping bones. Anse roared his war-cry and picked up his sword again.

JANAZIK leaped and darted and fenced, grinning, as he fought, demon-lights in his yellow eyes. A spear was hurled at him. He picked it out of the air, one-handed, and threw it back, even as he fought another guardsman. The rebel took advantage of it to get in under Janazik's guard. Swifter than thought, the warrior's dagger was in his left hand—and into the rebel's throat.

Back and forth, the battle swayed, roaring, trampling, and the rain mingled with blood between the cobblestones. Thunder of weapons, shrieking of wounded, shouting of challenges—lightning dancing overhead!

Suddenly it was over.

Anse looked up from his last victim and saw that the confusion no longer snarled around him. The street was heaped with dead and wounded, and a few individual battles were still going on. But the surviving guardsmen were in full flight, and the victorious warriors were shouting their triumph.

"That was a fight!" panted Janazik. He quivered with feral eagerness. "Now on to the castle!"

"I think," said Slavatozik thoughtfully, "that this was the decisive struggle as far as the city is concerned. Look at how many were involved. Almost all the patrols

must have come here—and now they're beaten. We hold the city!"

"Not much good to us while Volakech is in the castle," said Anse. "He need only sally forth with the Earth-weapons—" He leaned on his sword, gasping great lungfuls of the cool wet air into him. "But where's Ellen?"

"We've had heralds out shouting for her, as you suggested," said Slavatozik. "Now that the city is in our control, she should come out. If not——"

"—then I know how to blow up the boat," said Gonzales Alonzon bleakly. "If we can get inside the citadel to it."

The loyalists were reassembling their forces. Warriors moved over the scene of battle, plundering dead guardsmen, cutting the throats of wounded enemies and badly mutilated friends. It was a small army that was crowding around Anse's tall form.

His worried eyes probed into the dull gray light of the rainy dawn. Of a sudden, he stiffened and peered more closely. Someone was coming down the street, thrusting through the assembled warriors. Someone—someone—he knew that bright bronze hair . . .

Ellen.

He stood waiting, letting her come up to him, and his eyes were hungry. She was tall and full-bodied and supple, graceful almost as a Khazaki, and her wide-set eyes were calm and gray under a broad clear forehead and there was a dusting of freckles over her straight nose and her mouth was wide and strong and generous and—

"Ellen," he said wonderingly. "Ellen."

"What are you doing?" she asked. "What have you planned?"

No question of how he was, no look at the blood trickling along his sides and splashed over his face and arms—well—"Where were you?" he asked, and cursed himself for not being able to think of a better greeting.

"I hid with the family of Azakhagar," she said. "I lay in their loft when the patrolmen came searching for me. Then I heard your heralds going through the streets, calling on me to come out in your name. So I came."

"How did you know it wasn't a trick of Volakech's?" asked someone.

"I told the heralds to use my name and add after it—well—something that only

she and I knew," said Anse uncomfortably.

JANAZIK remained impassive, but he recalled that the phrase had been "Dougald Anson, who once told you something on a sunny day by Zamanau River." He could guess what the something had been. Well, it seemed to happen to all Earthmen sooner or later, and it meant the end of the old unregenerate days. He sighed, a little wistfully.

"But what did you want me for?" asked Ellen. She stood before Anse in her short, close-fitting tunic, the raindrops glittering in her heavy coppery hair, and he thought wryly that the question was in one sense superfluous. But in another sense, and with time so desperately short—

"You're the only one of us who can plot a course for the rocket," he said. "Alonzo here, or almost anyone, should be able to pilot it, but you're the only one who can take it to the Star Ship. So that, of course, is why Carson and Volakech were after you, and why we had to have you too. If we can get into the citadel, capture the rocket and get up to the Star Ship, it'll be easy to overthrow Volakech. But if he gets there first, all Khazak couldn't win against him."

She nodded, slowly and wearily. Her gray eyes were haunted. "I wonder if it matters who gets there," she said. "I wonder why we're fighting and killing each other. Over who shall sit on the throne of an obscure city-state on an insignificant planet? Over the exact disposition to be made of one little spaceship? It isn't worth it." She looked around at the sprawled corpses, lying on the bloody cobblestones with rain falling in their gaping mouths, and shuddered. "It isn't worth that."

"There's more to it than that," said Janazik bleakly. "Masfield Carson and his friend—his puppet, I think—Volakech would use the ship to bring all the world under their rule. Then they would mold it into a pattern suited for conquering a small empire among the neighboring stars."

"Volakech always talked that way, before his first revolution," said Ellen. "And Carse used to say—but that can't be right! He can't have meant it. And even if he didn't—what of it? Is it worth enough for brothers to slay each other over?"

"Yes." Janazik's voice was pitiless.

"Shall the freemen of Khazak become the regimented hordes of a tyrant? Let all this world be blown asunder first!"

"Shall the innocent folk of the other stars become his victims?" urged Alonzo. "Shall Khazak become a menace to the Galaxy, one which must be destroyed—or must itself destroy? Shall there be war with—Earth herself?"

"To Shantuzik with that," growled Anse. "These are our enemies, to be fought and beaten. Out there is the great civilization of the Glaxy, and they would keep us from it for generations yet, and make it in the end our foe. And Volakech is a murderer with no right to the throne of Krakenau. I say let's get at his liver!"

"Well—" Ellen looked away. When she turned back, there was torment in her eyes, but her voice was low and steady: "I'm with you in whatever you plan. But on one condition. Carse is not to be harmed."

"Not harmed!" exploded Janazik. "Why, that dirty traitor deserves—"

"He is still my brother," said Ellen. "When Volakech is beaten, he will not be able to do any more harm, and he will see that he was wrong." Her eyes flashed coldly. "Whoever hurts Carse will have me for blood-enemy!"

"As you will," shrugged Anse, trying to hide the pain in his heart. "But now . . . Our plan is to storm the citadel. We can't hope to take it, but we'll keep the garrison busy. Meanwhile a few of us break in, get the rocket, and take it back out here, where you will have an orbit plotted—"

"I can't make one that quickly. And who can pilot it well enough to land it here without cracking it up?"

THEY looked at each other, and then eyes turned to Gonzales Alonzo. He smiled mirthlessly. "I can try," he said. "But I'm only an engineer; I never imagined I'd have to fly the thing. Chiang Ching-Wei was supposed to be the pilot, but he's a prisoner now."

"If we smash the rocket—well, then we smash it," said Anse heavily. "It'll mean a long and hard war against Volakech from outside, and he'll have all the advantages of the new weapons. We may never overthrow him before he gets another boat built. Still—we'll just have to try."

Ellen said quietly: "I can pilot it."

"You!"

"Of course. I've been working on the second boat from the beginning. I know it as well as anyone, every seam and rivet and wiring diagram. I was aboard when Chiang took her on a practice run only a few days ago. I'll fly it for you!"

"You can't—we have to fight our way into the castle itself, the very heart of Volakech's power—you'd be killed!"

"It's the best chance. If you think we can get in at all, I stand as good a chance of living through it as anyone else."

"She's right," said Janazik. "And while we waste time here arguing, the citadel is getting ready. Come on!"

Automatically, Anse broke into movement, trotting along beside Janazik, and the army formed its ranks and followed them.

He had time for a few hurried words with Ellen, whispered as they went up the hill: "Stay close by me. There'll be a small group of us getting in, picked fighters, and we'll make a ring about you."

"Of course," she nodded. Her gray eyes shone, and she was breathing quickly. "I begin to see why you were a rover all those years, Anse. It's mad and desperate and terrible—but before Cosmos, we're alive!"

"Most recruits are frightened green before their first battle," he said. "You have a warrior's heart, Ellen—" He broke off, hearing the banality of his own words.

"Listen, my dearest," he said then, quickly. "We may not come alive through all this. But remember what I did say, down by the river that day. I love you."

She was silent. He went on, fumbling for words: "You wouldn't answer me then—"

"I thought it was just your usual talk to women."

"It may have been—then," he admitted. "But it hasn't been since, and it isn't now." His sword-calloused hand found hers. "Don't forget, Ellen. I love you. I will always love you."

"Anse—" She turned toward him, and he saw her eyes alight. "Anse—"

A bugle shrilled through the rain, high and harsh ahead of them. Dimly, they made out the monstrous bulk of the castle, looming through the misty gray light, its towers lost in the vague sky. Janazik's sword flashed from its sheath.

"The battle begins," said a voice out of the blurring rain.

Anse drew Ellen over against a wall and kissed her. Her lips were cool and firm under his, wet with rain; he would never forget that kiss while life was in him.

They looked at each other for a moment of wonder, and then broke apart and followed Janazik.

V

THE loyalists charged in a living wave that roared as it surfed against the castle walls and splattered a foam of blood and steel. From three sides they came, weaving in and out of the hailing arrows, lifting shields above them, leaving their dead behind them.

The blaster cannon mounted on the walls spouted flame and thunder. Warriors were mowed down before that whirling white fury, armor melted when the lightning-like discharges played over it, but still the assault went on with all the grim bitter courage of the Khazaki race.

Old siege engines were appearing, dragged out of storehouses and hiding places where they had been kept against such a day of need. Now the great catapults and ballistae were mounted; stones and fireballs and iron-headed bolts were raking the walls. A testudo moved awkwardly forth up the steep hill toward the gates. It was blasted to flaming molten ruin, but another got underneath the walls and the crash of a battering ram came from under its roof.

Shadowlike in the blinding rain, the warriors flitted up toward the walls. No spot of cover was too small for one of those ghostly shapes; they seemed to carry their own invisibility with them. Under the walls—scaling ladders appearing as if out of nowhere—up the walls and into the castle!

The ladders were hurled down. The warriors who gained the walls were blasted by cannon, cut down by superior numbers, lost in a swirl of battle and death. Boiling water rained down over the walls on those below, spears and arrows and the roaring blaster bolts. But still they came. Still the howling, screeching demons of Krakenau came, and died, and came again.

Anse cursed, softly, luridly, pain croaking in his voice: "We can't be with them. They're being slaughtered and we can't be with them."

"We're needed worse here," said Jana-

zik curtly. "If only Pragakech can maintain the assault for an hour—"

He and Anse loped in the forefront. Behind them came Gonzales, Ellen, and a dozen picked young Khazaki. They wove through a maze of alleys and streets and deserted market squares, working around behind the castle. The roar of battle came to them out of the gray mist of rain; otherwise there was only the padding and splashing of their own feet, the breath rasping harsh in their lungs, the faint clank and jingle of their harness. All Krakenau not at the storming of the citadel had withdrawn into the mysterious shells of the houses, lay watching and waiting and whetting knives in the dark.

The paths dipped steeply downward, until, when they came around behind the citadel and stood peering out of a tunnel-like alley, there was a sheer cliff-face before them. On this side the castle was impregnable. The only approach was a knife-edged trail winding up the cliff, barely wide enough for one man at a time. At its top, flush with the precipice edge, the wall was built. Against this wall, commanding the trail, there had in the old days been an archer post, but lately a cannon had been mounted there.

Yet that very security, thought Anse, might be a weakness. Except for that gun, the approach wouldn't be watched, especially with the fight going on elsewhere. So—

"Give me your weapon, Alonzo," said Janazik.

"Here." Gonzales handed him the blaster pistol. "But it only has two charges left in it."

"That may be enough." Janazik slipped it under his cloak. Then he wound a gold brassard about his arm and started up the trail. A couple of his Khazaki came behind them, then Anse, Ellen, and Alonzo, and finally the rest of the warriors.

THE trail was steep and slippery, water swirling down it, loose rocks moving uneasily beneath the feet—and it was a dizzying drop off the sheer edge to the ground below. They wound upward slowly, panting, cursing, wondering how much of a chance their desperate scheme really had.

Ellen slipped a little. Anse reached back and caught her hand. He smiled lop-

sidedly. "Now I don't want to let go," he said.

"I wonder—" Ellen looked away, then back to him, and her eyes were wide and puzzled. "I wonder if I want you to, Anse."

His heart seemed to jump up into his throat, but he let her go and said wryly: "I'm afraid I have to right now. But wait till later."

Up and up—Later! *Will there ever be a later?*

And if there is, what then? I'm still more than half a Khazaki. Can we live together in the great civilization I hardly comprehend?

It was simpler when Janazik and I were warring over the planet . . . Janazik! I wonder if two beings of the same race could ever know as close a friendship as that between us two aliens. We've fought and laughed and sung together, we've saved each other's lives, sweated and suffered and been afraid, together. We know each other as we will never know any other being.

Well, it passes. We'll always remain close friends, I suppose. But the old comradeship—I'll have to give that up.

But Ellen—

Up and up—

Janazik whistled, long and loud, and called: "Hail Volakech! Friends!"

He could dimly see the looming bulk of the blaster cannon, crouched behind its iron shield. Above it the walls of the castle were high and dark and—empty.

The voice came from ahead of him, taut with nervousness: "Who goes there?"

"A friend. I have a message for His Highness." Janazik moved forward almost casually. His eyes gleamed with mirth. It tickled his heart, this dicing with death. Someday he'd overreach himself and that would be the end, but until then he was having fun.

"Advance . . . No, no one else. Just you alone."

Janazik sauntered forward until he stood only a meter from the blunt ugly muzzle. He had his left arm out of his cloak, so that the golden brassard shone in plain view. Underneath, his right hand thumbbed the catch of Alonzo's pistol.

"Who are you?" challenged the voice from behind the shield.

"A messenger for his Highness from his allies in Volgazan," said Janazik. "Seeing that there was still fighting going on, I and my men decided to come in the back way."

"Well—I suppose I can let you in, under guard. But your men will have to stay out here."

"Very well." Janazik strolled over behind the shield.

There were three warriors crouched there, in front of a small door in the wall. One of them was about to blow his trumpet for a guard detail. The other two poised their spears near Janazik's throat. None of them thought that anyone outside the citadel might possess an Earth-weapon.

JANAZIK shot right through his cloak.

In that narrow space, the ravenous discharge blinded and blistered him, stung his face with flying particles of molten iron. The hammer-blow of concussion sent him reeling back against the wall. His cloak caught afire; he ripped it off and flung it down on the three blackened corpses before him.

Vision returned to his dazzled eyes. These Earth-weapons were hideous things, he thought; they made nothing of courage or strength or even cunning. He wondered what changes Galactic civilization would bring to old Khazak, and didn't think he's like most of them. Maybe Volakech was right.

But Anse was his comrade and Aligan had been his king. He whistled, and the others came running up.

"Quick," rasped Janazik. "The noise may draw somebody—quick, inside!"

"Can't we swing this lightning thrower around and blast them?" wondered a Khazaki.

"No, it's fixed in place." Anse threw his brawny shoulders against the solid mass of the door. It swung ponderously back and they dashed through the tunnel in the thick wall—out into the open courtyard of the castle!

The noises of the fight rose high from here, but there were only a few warriors in sight, scurrying back and forth on their errands without noticing the newcomers—a fact which did not surprise Anse or Janazik, who knew what vast confusion a battle was. The human remembered the layout now—the rocket would be over by the machine shops, near the donjon keep—"This way!"

They trotted across the court, around the gray stone bulk of the citadel's buildings and towers, toward the long wooden shed which housed the new machine shop.

PSORIASIS

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GREAT CLOWES STREET
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The rain was beginning to slacken now, and the sun was up behind its gray veil, so that there was light shining through slanting silver. Against the dark walls, the lean torpedo shape of the rocket boat gleamed like a polished spearhead.

"Now—ahcad!" Janazik broke into a run toward the boat, and they followed him in a close ring about Ellen.

A band of fighters came around the corner of the machine shop, in front of the rocket. The wet light shone off their brassards. Janazik swore bitterly, and his hand dropped to his sword.

One of the enemy warriors let out a yell. "Earthlings—two—three of them! Not ours—"

The blaster crashed in Janazik's hand, and five dropped their charred bodies on the ground. With a spine-shivering yell, Janazik bounded forward, and after him came Anse, Alonzo, and a round dozen of the fiercest fighters in Krakenau. The blaster was exhausted now—but they had their swords!

The leader of the enemy band was a huge Khazaki, dark-furred and green-eyed. His men were scattering in panic, but he roared a bull-voiced command and they rallied about him and stood before the rocket.

Volakech. By all the thirteen hells, *Volakech!*

He must have been leading reinforcements to a threatened point on the wall, thought Anse in a fleeting moment, and his sharp mind had instantly deduced that invaders were after the rocket—and that they could have no more blaster charges, or they would be using them. And Volakech's band was still larger than theirs, and he had all the forces of the citadel behind him if he could summon them!

THE two bands crashed together and steel began to fly. Anse stood before Ellen and lashed out at a spitting Khazaki who had reached for his belly with a sword. The enemy dodged past his guard, drilled in close. Ellen shouted and kicked at the native's ankles. He stumbled, dropping his defense, and Anse clove his skull.

Volakech roared. He swung a huge battle axe, and its shock and thunder rose high over the swaying tide of battle. Two of Janazik's men leaped at him. He swept the axe in a terrible arc and the spike cracked one pate and the edge split the other's face open. Alonzo sprang at him

with furious courage, wielding a sword. Volakech knocked it spinning from his hand, but, before he could kill the engineer, Anse was on him.

They traded blows in a clamor of steel. Axe and sword clashed together, sheared along chain mail and rang on helmets. It was a blur of rake and slash and parry, with Volakech grinning at him behind a network of whirling steel.

Anse gathered his strength and pressed forward with reckless fury. His sword hummed and whistled and roared against Volakech's hard-held guard. He laid open arms, legs, cheek; he probed and lunged for the rebel king's trunk. Volakech snarled, but step by step he was driven back.

Warriors fell, but it was on the bodies of foemen and even dying they stabbed upward at the enemy. Bitter, bloody, utterly ruthless, the struggle swayed about the rocketship. It was old Khazak that fought, the planet of warriors, and, even as he hewed and danced and slew, Janazik thought bleakly that he was trying to end the gory magnificence of that age; he was bringing civilization and with it the doom of his own kind. Khazak of the future would not be the same world.

If they won—if they won!

"To me!" he yelled. "To me, men of Aligan! Hai, Aligan! Krakenau! Dougald!"

They heard and rallied round him, the last gasping survivors of his band. But there were few of Volakech's men left, few.

"Volakech! Aid the king! To me, men of Volakech!" The rebel shouted at the top of his lungs. And Anse lunged in at him, beating against the swift armor of the axe.

"Anse!" Janazik's urgent shout cut through the clangor of battle. "Anse, here! We're blasting free!"

The human hardly heard him. He forced his way closer in against Volakech, his sword whistling about the usurper's helmeted head.

"Anse!" shouted Janazik. "Anse—Ellen needs you—"

With a tiger snarl, Anse broke free from his opponent and whirled about. A rebel stood before him. There was an instant of violence too swift to be followed, and Anse leaped over the ripped body and up to Janazik.

The Khazaki stood by the airlock. There

was a ring of corpses before him; his sword ran blood.

"Ellen?" gasped Anse. "Ellen?"

"Inside," rasped Janazik. "She's inside. We have to get out of here—only way to get your attention—*Come on!*"

Anse saw the armed band swarming at them from one of the outer towers, defenders who had finally noticed the battle at the rocket and were coming to aid their king. Not a chance against them—except the boat!

Man and Khazaki stepped back into the airlock. A storm of arrows and javelins broke loose. Anse saw two of his men fall—then Janazik had slammed the heavy outer valve and dogged it shut.

"Ellen!" he gasped. "Ellen—take the boat up before they dynamite it!"

The girl nodded. She was strapping herself into the pilot's seat before the gleaming control panel. Only Alonzo was there with her, bleeding but still on his feet. Four of them survived—only four—but they had the boat!

Through the viewport, Anse saw the attackers surging around the hull. They'd use ballistae to crush it, dynamite to blow it up, blaster cannon to fry them alive inside the metal shell—unless they got it into the sky first.

"Take the engines, Alonzo," said Ellen.

Gonzales Alonzo nodded. "You help me, Janazik," he said. "I'm not sure I—can stay conscious—"

THE pilot room was in the bows. Behind it, bulkheaded off, lay the air plant and the other mechanisms for maintaining life aboard—not very extensive, for the boat wouldn't be in space long. Amidships were the control gyros, and behind still another bulkhead the engine controls. Rather than install an elaborate automatic feed system, the builders had relied on manual controls acting on light signals flashed by the pilot. It was less efficient, but it had shortened the labor of constructing the vessel and was good enough for the mere hop it had to make.

"I don't know anything about it," said Janazik doubtfully.

"I'll tell you what to do—Help me——" Leaning on the Khazaki's arm, Alonzo stumbled toward the stern.

Anse strapped his big body into the chair beside Ellen's. "I can't help much, I'm afraid," he said.

"No—except by being here," she smiled.

Looking out, he saw that the assault on the castle was almost over—beaten off. It had provided the diversion they needed—but at what cost, at what cost?

"We might as well take off for the Star Ship right away," he said.

"Of course. And that will end the war. Volakech can either surrender or sit in the castle till he rots."

"Or we can use the ship to blast the citadel."

"No—oh, Cosmos, no!" Her eyes were filled with sudden horror.

"Why not?" he argued angrily. "Only way we can rescue our people if he won't give them up of his own will."

"We might kill Carse," she whispered.

It was on his tongue to snap good riddance, but he choked down the impulse.

"Why do you care for him that much?"

"He's my brother," she said simply, and he realized that in spite of her civilized protestations Ellen was sufficiently Khazaki to feel the primitive unreasoning clan loyalty of the planet. She added slowly: "And when Father died, years ago, Carse took his place, he's been both father and big brother to me. He may have some wrong ideas, but he's always been so—good——"

A child's worship of the talented, handsome, genial elder brother, and she had never really outgrown it. Well—it didn't matter. Once they had the Star Ship, Carse didn't matter. "He'll be as safe as anyone can be in these days," said Anse. "I—I'll protect him myself if need be."

Her hand slid into his, and she kissed him, there in the little boat while it rocked and roared under the furious assaults from without. "Anyone who hurts Carse is my blood foe," she breathed. "But anyone who helps me, and—and——"

Anse smiled, dreamily. Then engines began to stutter, warming up, and Volakech's men scattered in dismay. They had seen the fire that spurted from the rocket tubes.

And in the engine room, Masefield Carson held his blaster leveled on Alonzo and Janazik. "Go ahead," he smiled. "Go ahead—take the ship up."

VI

THE Khazaki swore lividly. His sword seemed almost to leap halfway out of

the scabbard. Carse swung the blaster warningly, and he clashed the weapon back. Useless, useless, when white flame could destroy him before he got moving.

"How did you get here?" he snarled.

The tall, bronze-haired man smiled again. "I wasn't in the fight," he said. "Volakech wanted to save my knowledge and told me to stay out of the battle. I wasn't really needed. But it occurred to me that your assault was obviously a futile gesture unless you hoped in some way to capture the boat. So I hid in here to guard it—just in case. And now—we'll take her up. We may just as well do so. Once I have the Star Ship—" He gestured at Alonzo. "Start the engines. And no tricks. I understand them as well as you do."

Gonzales strapped himself in place and stood swaying with weakness while he manipulated the controls. "I can't—reach that wheel—" he gasped.

"Turn it, Janazik," said Carse. "About a quarter turn—that's enough."

The impassive faces of meters wavered and blurred before Alonzo's swimming eyes. He had been pretty badly hurt. But the engines were warming up.

"Strap yourself in, Janazik," said Carse.

The Khazaki obeyed, sickly. He didn't really need the anti-acceleration webbing—Carse himself was content to hang on to a stanchion with one hand—but it would hamper his movements, he would have no way of making a sudden leap. Between them, he and Alonzo could handle the engines readily enough, Carse giving them their orders. Then once they were at the Star Ship he could blast them down, go out to capture Anse and Ellen—and the old books said one man could handle the ship if necessary—

How to warn the two in the pilot room? How to get help? The warrior's brain began to turn over, cool and steady now, swift as chilled lightning.

The boat spouted flame, stood on its tail and climbed for the sky. Acceleration dragged at Carse, but it wasn't too great for a strong man to resist. Carse tightened his grip on the stanchion. His blaster was steady on them.

Ellen's signal lights blinked and blinked on the control panels. More on the No. 3 jet, ease to port, full ahead, cut No. 2 . . . Alonzo handled most of it, occasionally gasping a command to Janazik. The

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan.'"

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won £2,000 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan.'"

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All you have to do is to send a 1s.
27 JOAN'S COTTAGE,



ASPECULATOR. A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to
LANIVET, BODMIN

DO YOU
BELIEVE IN
LUCK
?

bellow of the rockets filled the engine room.

And in the bows, Dougald Anson saw the world reel and fall behind, saw the rainy sky open up in a sudden magnificence of sun, saw it slowly darken and the stars come awesomely out. Gods, gods, was this space? Open space? No wonder the old people had longed to get away!

* * *

How to get help, how to warn Anse— Janazik's mind spun like an unloaded engine, spewing forth plan after unusable plan. Quickly, now, by Shantuzik's hells!

No way out—and the minutes were fleeing, the rocket was reaching for the sky, he knew they were nearing the Star Ship and still he lay in his harness like a sheep and obeyed Carse's gun-point orders!

The disgrace of it! He snarled his anger, and at Alonzo's gasped command swung the wheel with unnecessary savagery. The ship lurched as a rocket tube overfired. Carse nearly lost his hold, and for an instant Janazik's hands were at the acceleration webbing, ready to fling it off and leap at him.

The man recovered, and his blaster came to the ready again. He had to shout to be heard above the thundering jets: "Don't try that—either of you! I can shoot you down and handle it myself if I must!"

He laughed then, a tall and splendid figure standing strained against the brutal clanging acceleration. Ellen's brother—aye! And one could see why she wanted him spared. Janazik's lip curled back from his teeth in a snarl of hate.

THE rocket must be very near escape velocity now. Presently Ellen would signal for the jets to be turned off and they would rush weightless through space while she took her readings and plotted the orbit that would get them to the Star Ship. And if then Carse emerged with his blaster—

Anse had only a sword.

But—Anse is Anse, thought Janazik. If there is any faintest glimmer of a chance Anse will find it. And if not, we're really no worse off than now. I'll have to warn Anse and leave the rest up to him.

The Khazaki nodded bleakly to himself. It would probably mean his own death before Carse's blaster flame—and damn it,

damn it, he liked living. Even if the old Khazak he knew were doomed, there had been many new worlds of the Galactic frontier. He and Anse had often dreamed of roving over them—

However—

A red light blinked on the panel—Ellen's signal to cut the rockets. They were at escape velocity.

Wearily, his hand shaking, Alonzo threw the master switch. The sudden silence was like a thunderclap.

And Janazik screeched the old Kra-kenau danger call from his fullest lungs.

Carse turned around with a curse, awkward in the sickening zero-gravity of free fall. "It won't do you any good," he yelled thickly. "I'll kill him too—"

Alonzo threw the master switch up! With a coughing roar, the rockets burst back into life. No longer holding the stanchion, Carse was hurled to the floor.

Janazik clawed at his webbing to get free. Carse leveled his blaster on Alonzo. The engineer threw another switch at random, and the direction of acceleration shifted with sudden violence, slamming Carse against the farther wall.

His blaster raved, and Alonzo had no time to scream before the flame licked about him.

And in the control room, Anse heard Janazik's high ululating yell. The reflexes of the wandering years came back to galvanize him. His sword seemed to leap into his hand, he flung himself out of his chair webbing with a shout . . .

"Anse!" Ellen's voice came dimly to his ears, hardly noticed. "Anse—what is it—"

He drifted weightless in midair, cursing, trying to swim. And then the rockets woke up again and threw him against the floor. He twisted with Khazaki agility, landed crouched, and bounded for the stern.

Ellen looked after him, gasping, for an instant yet unaware of the catastrophe, thinking how little she knew that yellow-maned savage after all, and how she would like to learn, and—

The rocket veered, crazily. Anse caught himself as he fell, adjusted to the new direction of gravity, and continued his plunging run. The crash of a blaster came from ahead of him.

He burst into the control room and saw it in one blinding instant. Alonzo's charred body sagging in its harness, Janazik half out of his, Carse staggering to his feet—the blaster turned on Janazik, Janazik, the finger tightening—

TIGER-LIKE, Ause sprang. Carse glimpsed him, turned, the blaster half swung about . . . and the murderous fighting machine which was Dougald Anson had reached him. Carse saw the sword shrieking against his face; it was the last thing he ever saw . . .

Anse lurched back against the control panel. "Turn it off!" yelled Janazik. "Throw that big switch there!"

Mechanically, the human obeyed, and there was silence again, a deep ringing silence in which they floated free. It felt like an endless falling.

Falling, falling—Anse looked numbly down at his bloody sword. Falling, falling, falling—but that couldn't be right, he thought dully. He had already fallen. He had killed Ellen's brother.

"And I love her," he whispered.

Janazik drifted over, slowly in the silent room. His eyes were a deep gold, searching now. *If Ellen won't have him, he and I will go out together, out to the stars and the great new frontier. But if she will, I'll have to go alone; I'll always be alone—*

Unless she would come too. She's a good kid . . . I'd like to have her along. Maybe take a mate of my own too . . . But that can never be, now. She won't come near her brother's slayer.

"You might not have had to kill him," said Janazik. "Maybe you could have disarmed him."

"Not before he got one of us—probably you," said Anse tonelessly. "Anyway, he needed killing. He shot Alonzo."

He added, after a moment: "A man has to stand by his comrades."

Janazik nodded, very slowly. "Give me your sword," he said.

"Eh?" Anse looked at him. The blue eyes were unseeing, blind with pain, but he handed over the red weapon. Janazik slipped his own glaive into the human's fingers.

Then he laid a hand on Anse's shoulder and smiled at him, and then looked away.

We Khazaki don't know love. There is comradeship, deeper than any Earthling

knows. When it happens between male and female, they are mates. When it is between male and male, they are blood-brothers. And a man must stand by his comrades.

Ellen came in, pulling her way along the walls by the handholds, and Anse looked at her without saying a word, just looking.

"What happened?" she said. "What is the—Oh!"

Carse's body floated in midair, turning over and over in air currents like a drowned man in the sea.

"Carse—Carse—"

Ellen pushed from the wall, over to the dead man. She looked at his still face, and stroked his blood-matted hair, and smiled through a mist of tears.

"You were always good to me, Carse," she whispered. "You were . . . goodnight, brother. Goodnight."

Then turning to Anse and Janazik, with something cold and terrible in her voice: "Who killed him?"

Anse looked at her, dumbly.

"I did," said Janazik.

He held forth the dripping sword. "He stowed away—was going to take over the ship. Alonzo threw him off balance by turning the rockets back on. He killed Alonzo. Then I killed him. He needed it. He was a traitor and a murderer, Ellen."

"He was my brother," she whispered. And suddenly she was sobbing in Anse's arms, great racking sobs that seemed to tear her slender body apart.

But she'd get over it.

Anse looked at Janazik over her shoulder, and while he ruffled her shining hair his eyes locked with the Khazaki's. *This is the end. Once we land, we can never see each other, not ever again. And we were comrades in the old days . . .*

Farewell, my brother.

WHEN the Star Ship landed outside Krakenau's surrendered citadel, it was still raining a little. Janazik looked out at the wet gray world and shivered. Then, wordlessly, he stepped from the airlock and walked slowly down the hill toward the sea. He did not look back, and Anse did not look after him.



*They had opened it to find what
they most desired . . .*

Death-Wish

A SHORT STORY

By RAY BRADBURY

They wandered the dead and fragile cities, looking for the legendary Blue Bottle—not knowing what it was, nor caring, not really wanting to find it . . . ever . . .

THE sundials were tumbled into white pebbles. The birds of the air now flew in ancient skies of rock and sand, buried, their songs stopped. The rivers were currented with dust which flooded across the land when the wind bade it reenact an old tale of engulfment. The cities were deep laid with granaries of silence, time stored and kept, golden kernels of forgetfulness, pools and fountains of quietude and memory.

Mars was dead.

And then out of the large stillness, from a great distance, on the stones of an old highway, there was a tiny sound. First, like an insect, and growing larger, between the cinnamon hills, and finally broadening, flattening out, the sound buzzing and humming, while something moved, growing big.

The highway trembled. The rocks ground one upon another briefly. The sound grew into a thunder which shook down avalanches of dust in the old cities.

The sound ceased.

Mr. Albert Steinbeck and Mr. Leonard Craig sat in their rusted automobile, in the warm silence of midday, sighing. They looked at a city which did not move but stood with one stone upon another waiting for them to enter.

"Hello!" cried Mr. Steinbeck.

A tower dropped into soft dusting ruin.

"Hello!"

A second and third tower crumbled into whispers of dust.

"Hello!"

Steinbeck waited.

No more towers fell.

"It's safe to go in now," he said.

"To find the Blue Bottle?" said Mr. Leonard Craig, not moving.

"Yes."

"Why does everyone want it? What's in the Bottle?"

"I don't know." Steinbeck checked his equipment.

"Who does know?"

"Nobody knows. Those that found it never told."

"Then why bother?" said Craig, lying in his corner of the car, a cigarette unlit on his lower lip. His mouth barely moved. His eyes were half shut and faintly amused.

"Use a little sense," said Steinbeck. "It's because it might contain *anything* that everyone is looking for the Blue Bottle."

"Everyone?"

Steinbeck nodded. "It's old. Old as that desert there, or the canals."

"A Blue Bottle," said Craig, sitting up and looking around, as if trying to explain it to himself and the highway. "Blown by some ancient Martians, and it's in one of these damned cities. Mind you, I'm not criticising. I've got nothing to do. If I wasn't traveling with you, I'd be sittin' under a tree somewhere or swimming in a canal. I'm just along for the ride. Continue."

STEINBECK looked at the rusted car. They had found it in an old ruin somewhere, part of the flotsam of the first Industrial Invasion of Mars that had died when resources had petered out forty years ago. He and Craig had worked on the motor for six weeks and it ran, intermittently, from dead city to city, through the lands of the idlers and roustabouts, the dreamers and the lazers, like himself and Craig, men who had never wanted to do

anything and had found Mars a good place to do it.

"Look at it this way, Craig," said Steinbeck; "all of my life, I've done nothing. Nothing big. Everyone else I went to school with, they did something big, on Earth, on Venus, somewhere in the System. Now it's my turn."

"You're a tramp," said Craig truthfully.

"Not when I get that Blue Bottle."

"Let me figure." Craig counted his fingers. "Nine, no, ten years you've hunted that damn thing. Long before I met you. And now the last two years since I landed on this place, I've been tagging along, watching you twitch nights. I see you by the fire, asleep. You whine and shake. You get nightmares. You sure must want it bad, and since you don't even know what's in that damn Bottle, that means you don't even know what you want from life."

"Look, Craig, we argue about this every day."

"And every day I keep telling you to relax. You don't need an excuse to be a bum. You got this Blue Bottle as an excuse maybe, a rationalization, for you never doing anything. All I ask is a drink, some hot soup, a sandwich, plenty of sleep. No work, if I can help it. And I don't need a blasted Bottle to excuse my lazy carcass. All right, I'll shut up. Come on, we'll get into the city."

They walked on the stones of the avenue, past fountains of littered bone.

"This building?" asked Craig.

"Just a moment," said Steinbeck. He cupped his mouth and shouted, "You there!"

They ran back.

From the towers, in a shattering flight, stone griffens fell down. They banged the street. They flew to pieces. His voice summoned them like live animals, and the towers answered, groaned, cracked, the gargoyle's tilted over, twisting, plummeting. They fell one upon another, their faces splintered, their teeth stinging in small flints on Steinbeck's chest. That was the way of these cities. Sometimes towers as beautiful as a symphony would fall at a cough. It was like watching a Bach cantata disintegrate before your eyes. A moment later there was only a sweltering heap and silence.

"If the Blue Bottle was in there," said Craig, "we'll never know."

"Shut up."

They tested another building and entered.

"You take that room. I'll take this," said Steinbeck.

"In that bottle," said Craig, "is it a woman in there, a little accordion woman, all compressed up, like one of those tin cups you fold in on itself? or like one of those Japanese flowers you put in cold water and it opens out?"

"I don't give a damn for women."

"That's what you think. Maybe that's it. You never had a woman, so maybe, subliminally, that's what you hope is in it?" Craig pursed his mouth. "Or maybe, in that bottle, something about your childhood. That's a thought. All put up in a bundle, a lake, a telephone pole or a tree you climbed, a root-beer you drank, a sliver you got in your hand, green grass, a creek, some crayfish, how's that sound?"

Steinbeck's eyes focussed on a distant point. "Yes. Sometimes, that's almost it. I don't know."

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"What's in the bottle would depend, maybe, on who's looking. Old men would want a Youth Elixir in it. A scientist might want a perpetual motion machine in it. Biologists would expect to find the perfect edible all-purpose food to sustain life in any climate. What about you?"

"Some nights," said Steinbeck, "I almost know. I dream about it. All I know is I've got to find it."

"Now, if there was a shot of *bourbon* in it—"

"Get on, and look!"

THERE were seven rooms on the ground floor. They were filled with glitter and shine. From floor to tiered ceiling there were casks, scuttles, cribs, crocks, magnums, pails, stoups, tubs, urns, vases and cruet. These were fashioned of red, pink, yellow violet and black glass.

Steinbeck broke them, one by one, to eliminate them, to get them out of the way, so he would never have to go through them again, searching for the hidden treasure. The empty house sounded with continual breaking glass.

Steinbeck finished his room. He stood ready to invade the next. He was afraid to go on. Afraid that *this* time he would find it, the search would be over and meaning would go out of his life. It had been with him a long time, this fear that some day he *would* find the Bottle. And what would be left of his life *then*? Only after he had heard of the Bottle of Blue Glass from fire-travelers all the way from Venus to Jupiter, ten years ago, had life begun to take on a purpose. The fever had lit him and he had burned steadily ever since. If he worked it properly, the prospect of finding the Bottle might fill his entire life to the brim. Another thirty years, if he was careful, and not *too* diligent, of searching, never admitting aloud that it wasn't the Bottle that counted at all, but the search, the running and the hunting, the dust and the cities and the going-on. Then he could die, his life full of activity, as senseless as a clock set to sound out its twelve strokes at some future date, and then lie still.

What if he knew the Bottle to lie in the next room at this instant?

He would turn and walk out and not come back for many years. He knew that

as certainly as he knew the forests of grey web and thickets of spiders waiting in the long hall.

He heard a sound. He turned and walked to a window looking out into the courtyard. A small grey, streamlined motorcycle had purred up almost noiselessly, at the end of the street. A fat man with blond hair eased himself off the spring seat and stood looking at the towers. Another searcher. A rich one, this time. Steinbeck sighed. Thousands of them, searching and searching. But there were thousands of brittle cities and towns and villages and it would take a millenium to search them all.

"How you doing?" Craig appeared in a doorway.

"Get back to your own room and search."

"I searched. Nothing."

Steinbeck sniffed. "Do you smell anything?"

"What?" Craig looked about.

"Smells like—bourbon," said Steinbeck.

"Ho!" Craig laughed. "That's *me*!"

"You?"

"I just took a drink. Found some in the other room."

Steinbeck moved aside some red bottles and peered into a corner.

"Sure," said Craig. "I shoved some stuff around and I found a mess of bottles, like always, and one of them had some bourbon in it, so I drank it."

Steinbeck turned and stared.

"Say that again."

"So I drank it," said Craig.

"What would bourbon be doing in a Martian bottle?" asked Steinbeck. His hands were cold. He didn't move, but he knew that he was trembling. He took a slow step. "What color was the bottle?"

"I didn't notice, it was just a bottle—" Craig swallowed and turned pale. "Oh God!" he said. He put his hand to his throat and then to his mouth. "It was blue." And Craig was running.

STEINBECK wanted to yell, "No, don't! I'm leaving." He tried to walk out, to get away. But Craig was back now, and there was a bottle, as blue as the sky, the size of a small fruit, light and airy

in his hands as he set it down upon a table.

"Here it is, it doesn't look very interesting to me," said Craig. "It can't be the right one. After all, it's just a bottle, a bottle with some bourbon in it, and very refreshing." He smiled.

Steinbeck stood looking at it.

"I don't see anything inside," he said.

"You're insane," said Craig. "Go on, shake it."

Steinbeck picked it up, gingerly. He shook it.

"Hear the liquor gurgle inside?" said Craig.

"No."

"I can hear it. Just as plain."

"There's nothing in it, I tell you."

"You don't see anything?"

"No."

They set it on the table again and said nothing. Sunlight falling through a side window struck blue flashes off the tall, slender container. It was the blue of a star held in the hand. It was the blue of a shallow ocean bay at noon. It was the blue of a diamond at morning.

"This is it," said Steinbeck. "I know it

is. We don't have to look any more. We've found it."

"I guess you're right," said Craig, slowly. "If I see bourbon and you see nothing, it *must* be the Bottle. Are you *sure* you don't see anything?"

Steinbeck bent close and peered deeply into the blue universe of glass. "There's something *faint* there. I can almost see it, but not quite. Maybe if I open it up and let it out, what ever it is, I'll know."

"I put the stopper in tight. Here." Craig reached out.

"If you will excuse me," said a voice in the door behind them. Steinbeck and Craig did not move.

The plump gentleman with blond hair walked around into their line of vision with a gun. He did not look at their faces, he looked only at the blue glass bottle they held in their hands. He began to smile. "I hate very much to handle guns," he said, "but it is a matter of necessity now. I simply must have that work of art, and this need of mine overcomes any squeamishness I might have toward firearms. Now, the longer you refrain from giving me the Bottle, the more nervous I am inclined to become. My finger might easily cause an accident. To avoid any such unfortunate thing, I suggest that you let me take it and go."

Steinbeck was almost pleased. It had a certain beauty of timing, this incident, it was the sort of thing he might have wished for, to have the treasure stolen before it was opened. It was only Craig's presence that had forced him to go ahead with opening the Bottle anyway, and now—there was the good prospect of a chase, a fight, a series of gains and losses, and, before they were done, perhaps another four or five years spent upon a new search.

"Come along now," said the stranger. "Give it up. There's nothing in it for you, a lot for me." He shook the gun warningly.

Steinbeck handed it over.

"Thank you and goodbye," said the plump man, then hesitated. "But first, your-guns. I'm afraid I'll have to take them along with me, in case you should think of following." The guns were relinquished. "This is really amazing," said the plump man. "I can't believe it was as simple as this, to walk in, to hear two men



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talking, and to have the Bottle simply handed to me."

He wandered off down the hall, out into the daylight, talking to himself.

IT was midnight. The cities of Mars were bone and idle dust. Along the scattered highway the rusted car bumped and rattled, past cities where the tapestries, the meters, the gyrostats, the furniture, the paintings lay powdered over with mortar and insect wings. Past cities that were cities no longer, but only things rubbed to a fine silt that flowed senselessly back and forth on the winds between one land and another, like the sand in a gigantic hourglass, endless pyramiding and re-pyramiding. Silence opened up to let the car pass, and closed swiftly in behind.

Craig said, "We'll never find him. These damned roads. So old. Pot-holes, lumps, everything wrong. He's got the advantage on a motorcycle, you can dodge and weave. Damn it!"

They swerved to avoid a crevasse.

"You watch the sides of the road," said Steinbeck. "He could hide until we passed and then go the opposite direction."

"Maybe he had a rocket parked somewhere and went up in it."

"Wait a minute!" Steinbeck throttled the car down. He slowed and turned about. "I saw something back there."

"Where?"

They drove back a hundred yards. "There, you see?"

In the ditch, by the side of the road, they saw a large mass.

The plump man lay folded over his motorcycle. He did not move. His eyes were wide and when Steinbeck flashed his torch down, the eyes burned dully.

Steinbeck jumped down into the ditch and retrieved a gun from under the plump man's heaviness.

"Where's the Bottle?"

"I don't know." Steinbeck cursed.

"What killed him?"

"I don't know that either."

"The motorcycle looks okay. Not an accident. Looks as if he just let himself down here on his motorcycle and died."

Steinbeck rolled the body over. "No wounds. He stopped of his own accord."

"Heart attack. He had to stop. He got down off the highway to hide in case we came by. Thought he'd be all right. But the heart attack didn't go away. Killed him." He touched the body. "Cold. He's been dead at least five hours."

"That doesn't account for the Blue Bottle."

"Someone happened along. Lord, you know how many prospectors there are, on horseback, on foot, any old way."

They both scanned the desert around them. Far off in the starred blackness, on the cinnamon hills, they saw a dim movement.

"There!" Craig pointed.

"Looks like three men, on horseback."

"You going after them?"

"I haven't decided."

Craig opened his mouth to say something, but it was never said.

BELOW them, in the ditch, as they watched, the figure of the plump man glowed and began to melt. The eyes took on the aspect of moonstones under a sudden rush of water. The face began to dissolve away into fire. The hair resembled small firecracker strings, lit and sputtering. At any moment, he might explode, shatter apart, so many fragments of crystal and glass and molten lava. The body fumed. The fingers jerked with flame. Then, as if a gigantic hammer had struck a glass statue, the body cracked upward and was gone into a million shards, becoming mist as the breeze carried it across the highway.

"Good Lord," said Craig. "They must have done something to him, those three men, with a new kind of gun."

"It wasn't a gun," said Steinbeck.

"What was it, then?"

"I don't know. But I'll find out."

"Are you going to follow them?"

"Yes, I've decided. This decided me." He pointed to where the body had been.

"It's happened before, this way. Men I knew who had the Blue Bottle. They vanished. And the Bottle passed on to others, who vanished. This is the first time I was present when it happened. It looked like a million fireflies, when he broke apart, did you notice?"

"I noticed."

"We'd better start."

"In the car?"

"Yes."

"But three against two, and we have only one gun—"

"Stay here then." Steinbeck went back to the car. He judged the desert mounds, the hills of bone-silt and cinnamon. "It'll be a hard job, but I think I can poke the car through after them. I have to, now. I think I know what's in the Blue Bottle, and for the first time in my life I want to have it. Always before, it was the running after it that counted. I never really wanted to find it, because I knew that what ever was in it couldn't possibly be as big as my dreams of what it should be. And now, suddenly, I realize that what I want most of all is in the Bottle. Now. Waiting for me."

"Maybe you'll think I'm a coward," said Craig, coming up to the car where Steinbeck sat in the dark, his hands on his knees. "But I'm not going with you . . . because the Bottle means nothing to me in any way. I won't die for it. You're asking to be shot by those goons out there who're

running off with it. That's your business. I'll follow you up, on foot. Then, if they should capture you, maybe I can figure a way of helping you. I just want to live, Steinie. Maybe I'm different than you. You seem to want something awful bad, something even you don't know what. Me? I don't want anything but to kick around and drink and smell the air and sit down and think once in awhile. So you go on ahead and I'll walk. I just don't want to die right now. I like to walk at night, anyway, just looking around. Good luck."

"Thanks," said Steinbeck, and drove away into the dunes.

THE night was as clear as the water in a long river. It was as cool as water coming over the glass hood of the car. He drove the car over dead river washes and stones and spills of pebble, his hands fastened to the wheel as if all of destiny were in it.

He bent forward and gave the car full throttle. In the rushing roar, for a moment, there was time to cast his mind back, to all



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the nights in the last ten years, nights when he had built red fires on the sea bottoms, and cooked slow, thoughtful meals to spoon into his hungry mouth. And lying down and dreaming of his wants and desires. Always those dreams of *wanting* something. Not knowing what. Ever since he was a young man, the hard life on Earth, the great Panic of 2130, the slow starvation, and then the bucking through the planets, the womanless, loveless years, the alone years. You came out of the dark into the light, out of the womb into the world, and what did you find that you *really* wanted? Nothing. Nothing could touch you or change you. Out of the dark and comfortable womb into chaos, riot, want, torture. And wasn't it the same for all men? Were the rich men any better? What about that plump man back there on the highway, dead? Wasn't *he* always looking for something *extra*? Something that he didn't have? Peace? Or what?

So what was there for men like himself? Or for anyone? Was there anything at all to look forward to?

The Blue Bottle.

He braked the car to a halt. He leaped out, the gun ready. He ran in the dunes. Ahead of him, three horses reared up in terror. He fired a shot. He aimed but there was nothing to aim at. Empty-saddled, the horses screamed and pelted off, throwing up great showers of sand. Their hooves pounded past a dead city and the bony towers fell, stone upon stone, at the echoes.

Steinbeck ran hunched over. He cocked his gun. Then he returned it to his holster.

The three men lay on the cold sand, neatly. They were Earthmen, with tan faces and rough clothes and gnarled hands. Starlight shone on the Blue Bottle which lay among them.

Far away, the horses screamed faintly and plunged on.

Steinbeck watched the bodies.

And as he watched, the bodies began to melt. They vanished away into rises of steam, into dewdrops and crystals. In a moment they were gone.

Steinbeck felt the coldness in his body as the flakes rained across his eyes, flicking his lips and his cheeks.

He did not move.

The plump man. Dead and vanishing.

Craig's voice, "Some new gun . . ."

No. Not a new gun at all.

The Blue Bottle.

They had opened it to find what they most desired. All of the desiring men down the long and lonely years had opened it to find what they most wanted in all of the planets of the universe. And all had found it, even as had these three. Now it could be understood, why the Bottle passed on so swiftly, from one to another, and the men vanishing behind it. Harvest chaff fluttering on the sand, among the dry river beds. Turning to flame and fireflies. To mist.

STEINBECK picked up the bottle and held it away from himself for a long moment. His eyes shone clearly. His hands trembled.

So this is what I've been looking for? he thought. He turned the Bottle so it flashed blue starlight.

So this is what all men *really* want? the secret desire, deep inside, hid all away where we never guess? The subliminal urge. So this is what each man seeks, through some private guilt, to find?

Death.

An end to doubt, to torture, to monotony, to want, to loneliness, to fear, an end to everything.

All men?

No. Not Craig. Craig was, perhaps, far luckier. A few men were like animals in the universe, not questioning, drinking at pools and breeding and raising their young and not doubting for a moment that life was anything but good. That was Craig. There were a handful like him. Happy animals on a great reservation, in the hand of God, Craig and the men like him. With a religion and a faith that grew like a set of special nerves in them. The un-neurotic men in the midst of the billionfold neurotics. They would only want death, later, in a natural manner. Not now. Later.

Steinbeck raised the Bottle to his face. How simple, he thought, and how right. This *is* what I've always wanted. Nothing else. It was always in my mind but I never took it out into the light. I couldn't admit it.

The Bottle was empty and blue in the starlight. He took an immense draught of

the air coming from the Bottle, deep into his lungs.

"I have it at last," he thought.

He relaxed. He felt his body become wonderfully cool and then wonderfully warm. He knew that he was dropping down a long slide of stars into a darkness as delightful as wine. He was swimming in blue wine and lavender wine and red wine. There were candles in his chest, and fire-wheels spinning. He felt his hands leave him. He felt his legs fly away, amusingly. He laughed. He shut his eyes and laughed.

He was very happy for the first time in his life.

The Blue Bottle dropped onto the white sand.

AT dawn, Craig walked along, whistling. He saw the Blue Bottle lying in the first pink light of the sun on the empty white sands. As he picked it up, there was a fiery whisper of air. A number of orange and red and purple fireflies blinked on the air, and passed on away. This place was very still.

"Here's the Bottle," said Craig. "I'll be damned." He glanced toward the dead

windows of the city. "Hey, Steinbeck!" A tower collapsed into powder. "Steinbeck, here's your damn bottle! I don't want it. Come and get it!"

"Come and get it," said an echo, and the last tower fell.

Craig waited.

"That's rich," he said. "The Bottle right here and Steinbeck not even around to take advantage of it." He opened the Bottle and peered inside. "Yes, sir, just the way it was before. Full of bourbon, by hell! That's more *like* it." He drank and wiped his wet mouth. "Ah! Have another? Don't mind if I do."

He held the Bottle carelessly.

"All that trouble for a little bourbon. I'll just wait right here for Steinbeck and give him his old bottle. Meanwhile . . ."

The only sound in the dead land was the sound of liquid running into a parched throat. The Blue Bottle flashed in the sun. Craig smiled happily and drank again.

THE END

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The second of the two pictures reproduced above represents Mr. de Burgh as he is to-day in his eightieth year.

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NAME

ADDRESS

MEEM

A Short Story by MARGARET ST. CLAIR

The fog-shrouded marshlands of Vaudria seethed with man-hunt . . . and Duncan, with his stolen secret, sought refuge in the Earth-Ship GORGO. Safe behind steel . . . until, far away, a strange Lorelei shaped its song . . .

THIS time last year Duncan had been junior commissioner for protocol at the Terrestrial Embassy. Discreet, hard working, popular with his male and female colleagues alike, the future had seemed to hold nothing for him but a series of comfortably merited advancements to full consular rank. Now he crouched under the bridge in the chilly dankness of the Vaudrian night, holding on to the upright and shivering uncontrollably, while he prayed, prayed to everything in his nebulous pantheon, that the Vaudrian patrol wouldn't find him. It wouldn't be so bad if they merely shot him, but he doubted they would let it go at that.

The meem, smuggled warmly under his jacket, stirred lethargically. He could feel the tiny ticking of its thoughts going past his. "Safe," they ran, "safe? So tired. Safe on Earth."

Duncan grinned lopsidedly. Safe? Not by a damnsight! He wouldn't be safe until he was on board the *S. S. Gorgo*, if then. From the respected member of a respected profession he had turned, degree by degree, into a hunted man. He was a human explosive, the potential disseminator of a biological scandal of major size. If he ever got back to earth, what he had to tell would rip the heavy fabric of terrestrial-Vaudrian relations from bottom to top. And yet it had happened so imperceptibly!

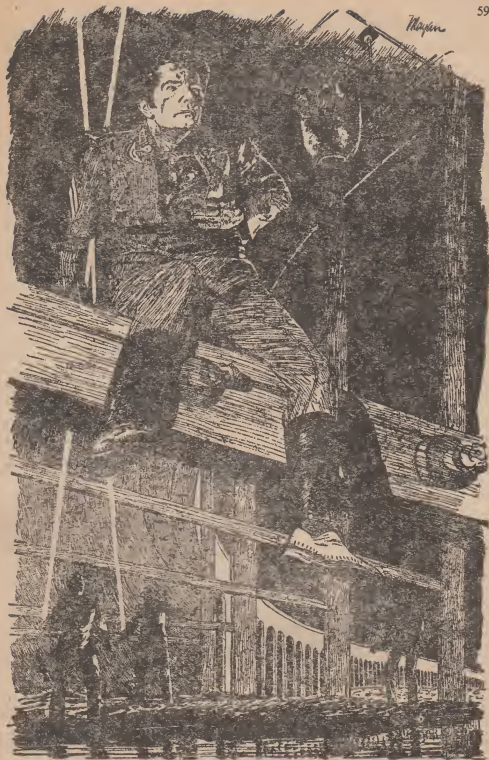
The conversation with Nickerson that afternoon last year had been the starting point. The Embassy staff had been clustered on the roof of the Embassy building, watching excitedly, through binoculars,

opera glasses, and a variety of optical aids, the Vaudrian throngs streaming into the already-packed great circle that marked the city's heart. The influx had ceased only when it was physically impossible for another Vaudrian to push his way into it. There had been a second of tense silence, when the huge crowd was utterly still. And then, thrillingly audible through the calm air, a single high note had poured out of nearly a million Vaudrian throats.

The people on the roof of the Embassy building had leaned forward intently. Nickerson, standing beside Duncan, had jogged his shoulder to be sure he was watching. Slowly the doors of the circular temple on the edge of the great circle had parted. The temple statue, visible on this day only, was revealed.

Duncan had seen it clearly; it was quite as impressive as people said. The group represented two persons, a seated man and a girl-child. The man's left hand was resting lightly and tenderly on the shoulder of the girl who stood between his knees. His other hand pointed past the girl's head into the distance, and the girl's rapt, dreaming gaze followed it. The inner meaning of fatherhood—loving, uplifting, fostering—had never been more beautifully expressed.

A SHUDDERING long-drawn *Oh* had gone up from the Vaudrians. Then the doors of the temple had begun to close again. Duncan had time to observe that the group was made of some frosty silver



The weird lights drew nearer in the fog . . . the Vaudrian patrol was ringing him in!

metal and that the object at the feet of the father was probably a meem, the universal Vaudrian pet. Then the temple doors had gone to, not to open for another year, and the silent crowd began to disperse. Tomorrow was Father's Day, but it would be observed without ceremonial within the quiet confines of millions of Vaudrian homes.

Duncan had begun to put his field glasses away. "By the Father and the Daughter," he quoted from the Vaudrian ritual to Nickerson; "I'm glad I saw it. It was impressive and beautiful, worth waiting a year for."

"Yes . . ." Nickerson had fidgeted with the straps of his binoculars. The rest of the Embassy staff was going down the escalator, chattering in subdued tones, but Nickerson seemed to want to linger on the roof and talk. Since he was Duncan's superior, Duncan waited respectfully for him to speak. Nickerson had cleared his throat and leaned toward him. "Did you know . . . that they're not mammals, my boy?"

Duncan had been taken aback. The point had never occurred to him. Like most Terrestrials, he had found the Vaudrians unsympathetic except where their father-daughter cult was concerned, but he had never questioned their basic likeness to himself.

"But . . . they're warm-blooded and they suckle their young," he said after a moment. "They look like us, except for their greater height and their bluish pigmentation."

"There's more to being a mammal than warm blood and suckling," Nickerson had said. "Besides, did you ever notice that they don't suckle their children when they're very young?"

(How much had Nickerson surmised or guessed? Duncan wondered. He shifted his numb fingers on the clammy wood of the bridge and tried not to cough. Everything? No, the remark about the suckling must have been no more than a coincidence.)

Nickerson had pulled at his sandy moustache for a moment. "Of course you understand this is in *strict* confidence, my boy," he had said. Duncan had smelled the heavy sweetness of phloemis on his breath. "One of the chaps at the Embassy here whose hobby was biology told me a few

things he'd found out about them." He had hesitated; and if he had stopped there (Duncan thought, listening to the cold lapping of the water under the bridge), everything would have been all right. Duncan would have been sitting in front of one of the Embassy fires now, sipping a night-cap of champagne and thinking that it was about time for bed. But Nickerson had gone on, he had gone on and ruined everything.

"They reproduce by parthenogenesis," he had said. Duncan could feel now, as vividly as if it had been yesterday, the shock the slow words had given him. "Inokeye assured me it was by parthenogenesis."

"But—but—" Duncan had stammered. He had stared blankly at Nickerson, expecting a hint that the older man was making a joke. "That's impossible! What about their cult of fatherhood?"

Nickerson had shrugged for answer.

"But—" Duncan had repeated. "But I always understood that in parthenogenesis no males were born."

NICKERSON had looked all around him before answering and then, though there was no one on the roof except themselves, had lowered his voice.

"You really must keep this to yourself, Duncan," he had said warningly. "Terrestrial industry—I don't think it's altogether a good thing—has become so dependent upon large-scale imports of benite from Vaudria that we can't risk offending them. Vaudrian touchiness in these matters is really remarkable. Did you know that no Terrestrial has ever seen, been allowed to see, I mean, a Vaudrian text on biology?—But Inokeye thought the answer to your point about males being born might lie in the fact that they aren't *functional* males."

"You mean there's no mating?"

"There not only isn't, there couldn't possibly be." And Nickerson had gone into anatomical details. He had finished with a further warning to Duncan to keep what he had heard strictly to himself.

Nobody could possibly have heard the conversation. Duncan and Nickerson had been alone on the roof, in the open air. But next week Nickerson had been unexpectedly transferred to Mars—kicked upstairs, as Embassy scuttlebutt had it—and Duncan

had begun to notice a certain thickening in the atmosphere that surrounded him personally. He had laughed at himself for his suspicions, but he had set traps. As a result of the trap-setting, he had found that his papers were being searched regularly twice each week.

His colleagues in the Embassy were not quite so friendly as they had been. Toby, Nickerson's successor, called Duncan in for a long, pointless interview, in the course of which he expressed admiration for the Vaudrian Father-Daughter cult and pleasure that it was being extended to Earth. Duncan had perceived that he was being tested, that his loyalty was being checked. But loyalty to what? To whom?

Even then it might have died down gradually, except for the lettergram from Nickerson and Duncan's friendship with Jrar. Jrar was a young Vaudrian chemist who had come to the Embassy to try to arrange for the importation of some special terrestrial chemical apparatus he wanted. Duncan had helped him with the papers and discovered a tepid liking for him. They had lunched together once or twice.

Jrar had been somewhat less reticent than most Vaudrians. Duncan had learned that he was twenty-two, that he wasn't married yet (highly unusual for a Vaudrian), that though he had good prospects he wasn't altogether satisfied with them.

It was toward the end of the second lunch date that the significant thing (Duncan realized it now) had been said. Jrar had been holding the restaurant's meem on his knees, stroking its thick blackish fur absently, and Duncan had said something or other about wondering why meems were so universally popular. They were, he thought, too sluggish and unresponsive to make good pets. Jrar had looked at him for a moment and then, in a voice unlike his usual one, had said, "Did you ever notice, Duncan, how the meems disappear after Father's Day?"

That had been all. Jrar had changed the subject quickly after that.

DUNCAN shifted his position, trying to ease his cramped limbs. His hands were so cold that he was afraid he might lose his grip and fall. He leaned forward abruptly, apprehension waking in him. Had he seen, about half a mile off through the light mist, a spot of light that seemed

to waver and slowly expand? That would be the patrol, and if it was, he'd have to get out. Where could he go? His rendezvous with the *Gorgo's* third mate wasn't due for another two hours. He'd wait a little, wait and hope and keep his fingers crossed.

The friendship with Jrar would have stopped anyway. The two men had not enough in common to keep their interest up. But the next day Toby had called Duncan into his office and told him sternly that, as Duncan must already know, friendships between Vaudrians and Terrestrials were not encouraged. There had been complaints about his seeing Jrar from a Vaudrian high-up. Duncan must drop the acquaintanceship.

Duncan had listened and agreed, fuming inwardly. He had been too angry to defend himself. He'd gone back to his room and read the lettergram from Nickerson again, more and more puzzled by it. It seemed on the surface to be merely a friendly letter, full of personal news and trivialities. But it didn't sound quite like Nickerson, and after a good many hours Duncan had succeeded in decoding it. Nickerson advised him urgently to make contact with the *S. S. Gorgo's* third mate. The *Gorgo* wasn't due in port for a month yet. Next week the Vaudrian newscaster had announced, among other items, that the body of a young Vaudrian chemist, a man named 803 Jrar, had been found in an abandoned house.

Duncan was tall enough to pass for Vaudrian, and the blue pigment could be simulated. He decided to try to pick up Jrar's trail.

He had been very, very careful. He had, on the whole, had considerable success. He had found, as he thought, that Jrar had been murdered. And he had found—

It was the patrol. He would have to leave the bridge immediately. The spot of light had been much nearer this time. That meant that they were "ringin" the area where he was, piece by piece.

Duncan began to work his way toward land, jumping from trestle to trestle of the bridge. Once he missed his footing on the slippery rounds and nearly went into the deep, icy stream. His alarm must have registered in the meem's little mind, for he could feel the instant patter of its thoughts. "Be careful, Duncan. Not safe. Get to Earth. Be safe."

HE stood hesitating when he had reached the shore. Where could he go? In his dirty, exhausted condition, the disguising pigment gone, the first Vaudrian who saw him would call the patrol. He'd try the *Gorgo*, on the chance that the third mate might be around somewhere.

His physical activity seemed to have aroused the meem from its lethargy. Its thoughts were coming in a thick stream now. Occasionally Duncan answered them. Discovering that meems were telepathic and how to contact them had been one of his most valuable achievements in the period during which he had been following Jrar. The discovery had enabled him to pick out a meem which was discontented and afraid and hence would cooperate.

The *Gorgo* was a long way off, and though Duncan tried to hurry, the days of exposure and strain had told on him. Once he looked back and saw the expanding ring of light near where he had been on the bridge. An involuntary quiver passed over him. What would have happened to him if the patrol had caught him? What happened to the meems, probably. It was characteristic of Vaudrian psychology to make the punishment fit the crime.

Finding out about the meems had been pure accident. Duncan had been sitting in a third-rate bar, drinking the licorice-flavored pap that passed for intoxicating liquor on Vaudria. The bar hostess had stepped out to get change for the bill he had given her. And then her baby, in the room behind the ill-lit bar, had begun to cry.

Duncan had hesitated. But the baby had kept on crying, louder and louder, until finally Duncan, in his role of Vaudrian male, had stepped into the back to try to comfort it. He'd jounced the crib up and down several times—it was suspended on springs from the ceiling—and when the infant kept on screaming had put out his hand uncertainly toward its cheek.

The baby was very young, less than a month. But it had turned its head toward Duncan's fingers with uncanny rapidity. And while he had still been wondering at the movement, it had licked fiercely at his hand.

Duncan had let out an amazed cry. The child's tongue had been as hard and rough as a file. His wrist was smarting and

stinging where it had rasped the flesh from it.

Then the outer door had banged and the bar hostess had come running in, all apologies for the accident. (Fortunately she hadn't seen the color of the blood oozing from Duncan's wrist.) She had picked up the child and soothed it expertly, and when it hushed had said, as if in explanation, "His meem died too soon. He misses it."

Duncan had had another drink and left. That night he had stolen the meem.

HE could see the *Gorgo* now through the thin mist, a mile-high bulk. The ship was loading cargo. He could hear the whine of the winches and see the aureoles of its sodium lights through the haze. Ingots of benite were moving steadily into the ship's dozen holds. In the confused activity of loading, he might be able to get close and look for Picket, the third mate.

An instant later Duncan felt despair invade him. Twenty or so Vaudrian soldiers were standing about the open holds, as if

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they were on guard. Their officer (an elderly woman, as always) was talking to the *Gorgo's* second mate.

Had the message from Nickerson been detected? If so, the soldiers were on the lookout for him, Duncan, and Picket must be already under arrest. Duncan came closer, thankful for the cover given by the mist, and listened intently.

What he heard reassured him. The Vaudrian officer's high voice carried well; she and the mate were discussing smuggling and he was assuring her that the Vaudrian government would have the full cooperation of the *Gorgo's* personnel in seeing that nothing went in or out of the ship illicitly.

The message, then, hadn't been discovered, and Picket was still at large. But what was Duncan to do? He looked behind him and saw, with painful apprehension, that the expanding lights of the "ringing" process were getting close again.

The meem stirred beneath his jacket. "Rope," its thoughts came; "Duncan, climb little rope."

Duncan looked about, wondering what the creature meant. (It was apparently somewhat clairvoyant, as well as telepathic, since it couldn't see from its hiding place.) After a moment, he located the rope. It was a slender electrical cable to one side in the shadow. It went up to a ring that was near an open hatch. The cable was used, Duncan knew, for grounding the huge charge of static electricity the *Gorgo* had picked up in space. He tested the cable, and it was solidly tied. He only hoped the insulation was sound on it.

He waited an instant, taking deep breaths. Then he caught hold of the cable and began to haul himself up on it, hand over hand.

He was wickedly tired. His weight wrenched at his shoulder sockets, and his muscles felt soft and hot. The cable was slack, and that increased the difficulty of his climb. The fog thickened as he went up.

He was two thirds of the way to the ring, fifty or sixty feet from the ground, when there came a burst of shouts at him from below. A light shone up dimly through the fog; somebody had seen him. A second later there came the long roll of a stun gun.

The meem was frightened; its thoughts

went screaming past Duncan in almost vocal hysteria. The stun gun trilled again. Duncan bit his lip until he tasted blood. Then he let himself slide down the cable about ten feet, and, with a precise coordination of which he never would have believed himself capable, used the momentum thus imparted to swing in at an open port-hole below him and to the right.

He almost missed it. He caught the edge of the frame with his fingernails, and clawed his way over it; then he was in a softly-carpeted corridor and running down it desperately.

He made two turns before he found a stateroom whose door had been left ajar. He darted in, barred the door, and collapsed against it. His whole body was shaking with his heart's desperate thuds.

He wasn't safe. They knew he was on the ship, and they'd search the ship for him. He might be able to hide for a while, but sooner or later he'd be found. He'd exchanged the frying pan for a pot of similar temperature.

He couldn't go any further. He'd have to rest. He sank down on the padded bunk, so tired that he hardly cared if he was caught.

The meem poked its flat head out. Its dull eyes looked at him. "The man, the man you want. Near here," came the patter of its thoughts.

"How do you know?" Duncan asked aloud.

"He is thinking of you."

DUNCAN looked at the meem for a moment. It had lain down again, as if exhausted by its recent activity.

"Where is he?" Duncan asked.

"To your right."

Duncan scrubbed his face hastily with the end of a damp towel—he might meet someone in the corridor—and smoothed his hair. His image in the mirror was still desperate and hollow-eyed. He stepped into the corridor.

He found Picket leaning up against one of the bulkheads, his hands in his pockets, whistling idly. The stripes on his blue sleeves identified him clearly enough. Duncan softly gave him the countersign.

"You're not mixed up in anything—unh—serious, are you?" Picket asked when the two men had gone back to the cabin. His sleepy, good-natured face wore

a disconcerted look. It was clear that Duncan's unexpected arrival and hunted, harried appearance had discomposed him.

Duncan hesitated. He was too tired to think. He decided on the exact truth. "I stole this," he said, indicating the limp form of the meem. "Taking them from Vaudria is forbidden by interplanetary agreement. But they would have killed it if I'd left it there."

Picket's face cleared a little but remained dubious. He jingled the keys in his pockets uncertainly and frowned at the meem. "I guess it'll be all right," he said at last. "Old Nickerson did me a good turn once, and I'd like to pay it back. He said you were in some sort of mess with the Vaudrians."

"Are they searching the ship?" Duncan asked.

Picket looked surprised. "Why, no," he said. He halted and grinned boyishly. "You and old Nick seem to have Vaudria on the brain. The last time I saw him, all he could talk about was how Vaudrian trade was getting too important to earth. I haven't cared much for the Vaudrians I've met, but they're not sinister. Nickerson's wrong about that. They're just like anybody else."

Duncan bit his lip and made no reply. Was this the attitude he'd have to buck when he got back to earth? Business as usual and no slanders, please, on the Vaudrians? But he had the meem, and examination by a biologist would show that what he had to say was true. He could convince them, he knew he could.

"You look worn out, old timer," Picket said sympathetically. "Lie down and rest, and I'll go see the purser and have him put you on the passenger list. I'll fix it up with him about your passport, too." He cleared his throat. "I don't know why you stole that thing, and I'm not going to ask. But the Vaudrians won't get you now. We're jetting for Terra tomorrow at 16. You're safe here."

Where else was there to go, what else could he do?

"I hope so," Duncan said.

IN the office of the Vaudrian overseer of police, a kilometer or so from the space port, 429 Bood was remonstrating respectfully with his immediate superior.

"Would it not be well to take them now,

my lady? They must not escape. We know they are on the ship. We could apply to the captain for license to search the ship."

88 Etath smiled at him indulgently. "And if he refuses it?" she said. "That would be unpleasant. It is better this way, Bood." She put her lean bluish fingers together. "Are you forgetting what day tomorrow is?"

"Oh," said 429 Bood.

"There will be no trouble, no unpleasantness. It will happen quietly. He is bound to be affected. I have seen it before with men from Earth."

"Oh," said Bood once more.

"Bring your wife with you when you report for duty tomorrow," said 88 Etath, dismissing him. "And see that the men under you bring theirs."

* * *

Duncan was roused from apprehensive reveries next morning by Picket's discreet rap on the cabin door. Picket had brought breakfast and, in a musette bag, a change of clothing. There was a worried expression on his pleasant face.

"When you've finished, I think you'd better get out of here," he said to Duncan as he ate. "I brought one of my old suits for you."

Duncan pressed one hand to the back of his neck. "Is—are the Vaudrians searching the ship?"

"No, it's just Vaudrian sightseers. Mainly women, and only one or two of the men are armed. The old man gave them permission to go over the ship."

"But we're not taking on passengers until twelve, and they might wonder about you if they saw you. I think you'd better change into my old clothes and go up to the chart room with me. If they see you there, they'll think you're an officer. What about that thing, though?" Picket indicated the meem, which, as inert as a feather stole, was lying on the edge of the bunk. "What can we do with it?"

Duncan pressed his hand once more to the base of his skull. The meem's eyes were open, so he knew it was not asleep, but he could no longer make contact with its thoughts. "It can hide under my tunic. I've carried it that way all along."

Picket's face relaxed a little. "Can it be trusted to keep still, though? You said stealing it was forbidden by interplanetary

agreement. You might get into a mess if it gave you away."

"It'll be quiet," Duncan said abstractedly. "It wants to get to Earth just as much as I do. It would be killed if it stayed here." He stood up, staggering a little. He had to catch at the bracket above his head to get his balance back.

Picket looked at him in quick alarm. "What's the matter?" he said. "Are you sick?"

"I've got a splitting headache, that's all. I might be a little feverish."

"Oh. You'll feel better when we're in space, I guess."

DUNCAN began to change into Picket's uniform. There was, as he had foreseen, room enough for the meem inside the tunic. He picked the animal up and arranged it against his chest. As if the movement had disturbed it, the sluggish current of its thoughts began flowing again ("Safe? Safe? So far to earth."), and it cooperated with him lethargically.

"Now, where do we go?" Duncan asked when he had finished. For a moment he pressed both hands tightly to his head. "Lord, how my head hurts. I took two tablets from the aid chest when I woke up, but they didn't help. I don't feel quite myself."

Picket looked at him but made no comment. He led Duncan out into the corridor and turned to the left. A hundred steps further, and they turned to the left again.

"The chart room's on the next level," Picket said softly. "The shafts aren't turned on, so we'll have to walk up the emergency stair." They moved on a few steps.

"Hey, where are you going?" Picket cried in sudden amazement. "The sightseers are down that way! Come back here! Come back!"

Duncan made no answer. With rigid energy he shook off Picket's grip on his arm. He began walking down the corridor toward the distant group of sightseers with long, stiff steps, shaking his head from side to side.

Picket stared at him unbelievably for a second and then came after him. He caught him by both shoulders and held on. "Stop it!" he hissed. "Are you out of your mind?"

With no perceptible exertion Duncan broke away from him. His face was darkly

flushed and his lower jaw hung loose. He made a faint, miserable noise. Then, as if obeying some irresistible call, he started toward the Vaudrians again with the same stiff, bouncing walk.

Picket hesitated. It was already too late. Heads were turning toward them, voices were being raised. His face a mask of bewilderment, Picket leaned back against the bulkhead and incredulously watched.

As Duncan drew nearer the group of sightseers, it shaped itself smoothly into an open square. There was something faintly menacing about the formation, but Duncan did not even slow down. When he was about five feet from the Vaudrians he stopped and, with fingers whose stiffness was apparent to Picket even at that distance, began to unbutton his tunic. The meem hopped out.

Four silenced stun guns hissed softly together. Duncan fell as if he had been poleaxed, stiffly and in one piece. 88 Etath gave a low order to her men. They closed evenly around Duncan and picked him up.

The meem paid no attention to what was going on behind its back. It was wholly occupied with frisking and curvetting around the alluring females of its race. Their attraction—the wonderful attraction which had reached into the cabin seeking the meem and enmeshed Duncan at the same time—held the animal irresistibly.

It knew what would happen to it, but it no longer cared. Since Duncan had stepped into the corridor with it in his tunic it had ceased to struggle and resist. After the mating there would come the egg laying, after the egg laying the long period when the young Vaudrians would feed painfully on its still living flesh.

What did it matter? The desire whose contagion, received telepathically by Duncan, had driven Duncan straight toward the Vaudrian stun guns, burned brightly and compellingly in the meem. Duncan would probably share its final fate as food for the Vaudrian young. What did it matter? The meem was the Vaudrian functional male, the semi-parasitic father of the next generation. Its females were before it. Today was Father's Day. The meem wanted to mate.

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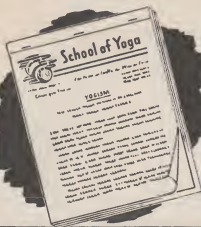
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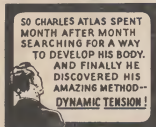
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